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THE OLD
MADHOUSE
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WILLIAM DE MORGAN

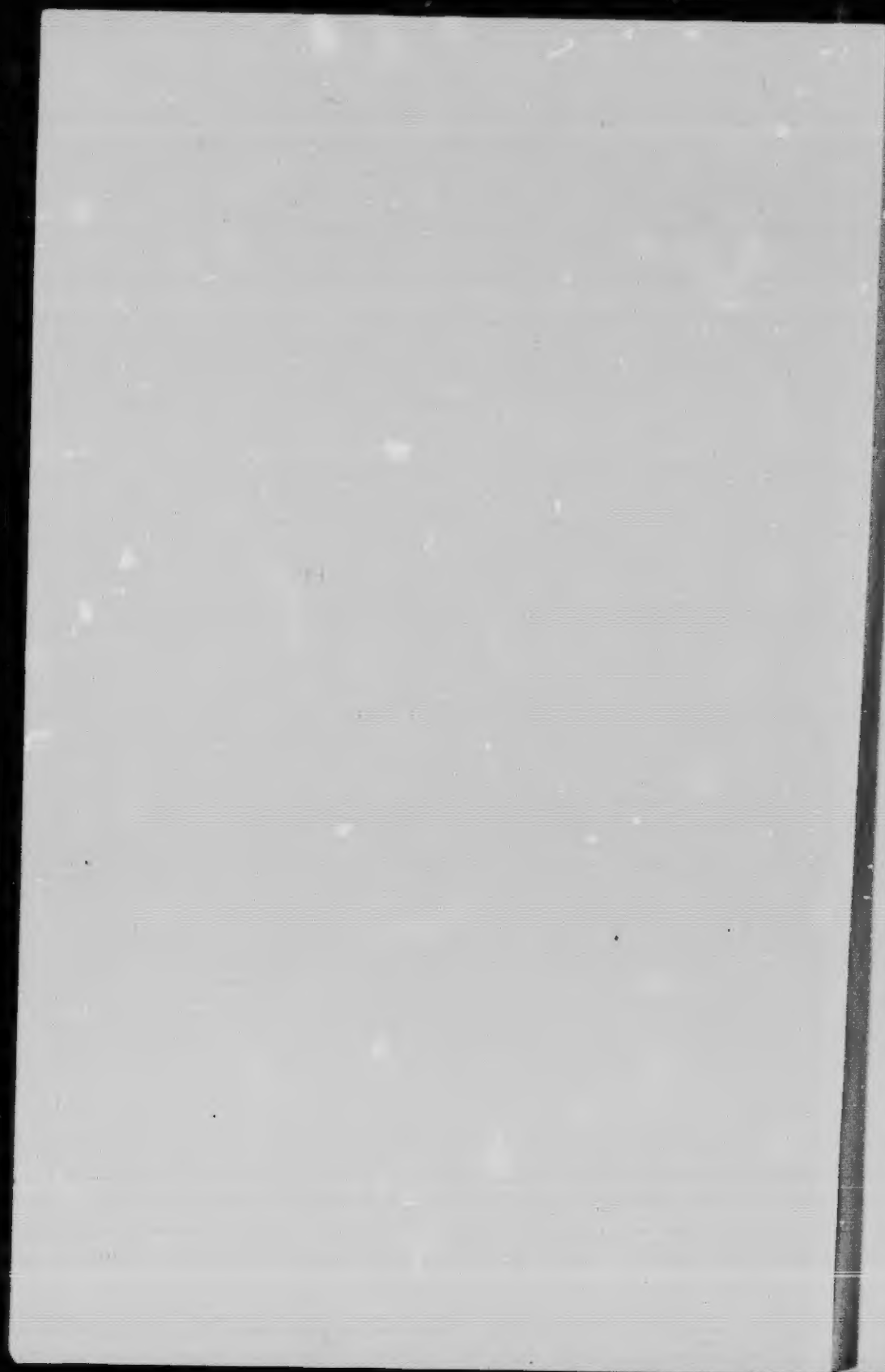


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DE. MORGAN, WILLIAM F.



THE OLD MADHOUSE



THE OLD MADHOUSE

BY

WILLIAM DE MORGAN

AUTHOR OF "JOSEPH VANCE," "ALICE-FOR-SHORT,"
"SOMEHOW GOOD," ETC.

TORONTO

J. M. DENT AND SONS, LTD.

1919

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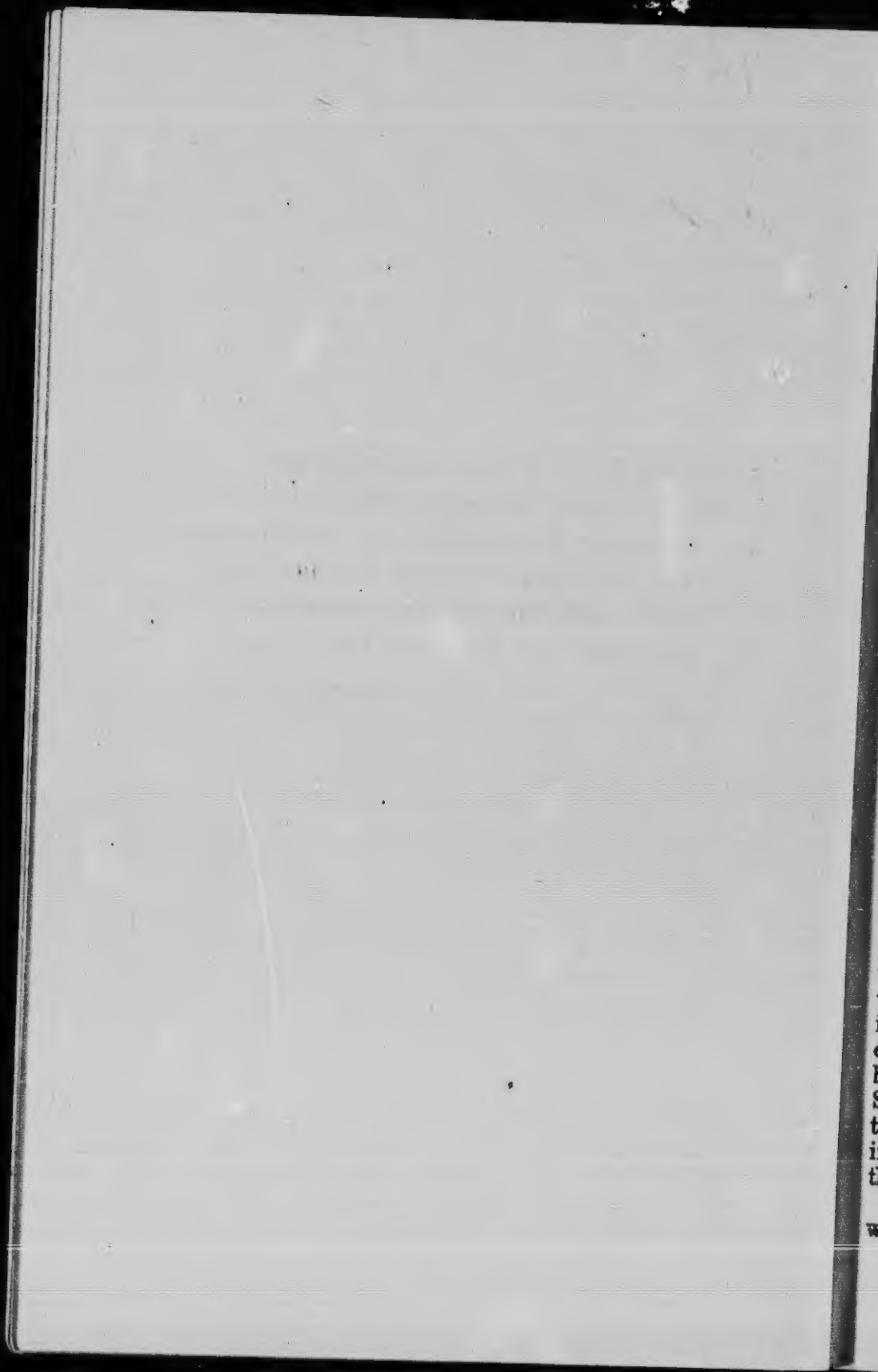
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TO ALL OUR AMERICAN FRIENDS
WHO BY THEIR NEVER FAILING SYMPATHY
AND GENEROUS APPRECIATION OF HIS WRITINGS
WERE A CONSTANT SOURCE OF PLEASURE
AND GRATIFICATION TO MY HUSBAND
I GRATEFULLY DEDICATE THIS BOOK.

E. DE M., 1917.



THE OLD MADHOUSE

CHAPTER I

VERY near the end of last century there was a house in Maida Vale which had a garden in front, where arbutus and laurustinus leaves got very dusty in the summer, because of the traffic. The traffic has changed its mind now, and kicks up no dust. But the stench of its petrol baffles language to describe.

Are we the better or the worse off by the change? The Optimist says better, the Pessimist says worse. I think the present writer must be sitting on a fence—a peyorist, suppose we say, since jargon is in vogue nowadays—as a clean-leaved garden always puts him in a good humour, till a depraved motor-car comes, belching out its hideous stench as it petrollicks down the road. Then he cries aloud to the dust that is gone for ever, to come back and bring with it the musical hoof of the horse, and even what a euphemism of that date referred to as the condition of the roads.

But that is neither here nor there. The arbutus and laurustinus leaves at this front garden in Maida Vale were very dusty at that date. As this was equally true of every other garden on the main road; you could not have identified the house. You might have knocked-and-rung at a dozen houses before the servant who opened one of their doors admitted that it was Mrs. Frederic Carteret's; or that she herself would see if that lady was at home; that is to say, would ascertain her readiness, or otherwise, to receive a visitor.

That, also, is neither here nor there. The house was there; and was Mrs. Frederic Carteret's, who was a widow, and on the way to fifty. There were many more remains of a beautiful woman about this lady than there were of a fine sample—according to Mr. Bailey—about Mrs. Gamp. In fact, all but the whole of one was left. The colour of her hair wasn't grey yet, and her beauty was still a topic of conversation at afternoon teas in St. John's Wood and thereabouts. So was her handsome son of twenty-two, about whom all were agreed—always had been—that if Frederic would only concentrate, he would make his mark, and thereby justify his existence.

If every one of us had to justify his existence, or be shot, what a scanty population of survivors would be left, and how

detestably conceited they would be! This, however, is most certainly neither here, there, nor anywhere else. Forgive and overlook it.

Frederic didn't concentrate—wouldn't concentrate! It was not the verdict of his family alone; it was the voice of humanity, whenever it came across Fred. It may have had a doubtful sound now and then about what would come of concentration. The making of a mark was not always the end to achieve. Some said, with moderation, that we should hear more of that young man—you see if we didn't!—while others discerned that he would be in Parliament before we knew where we were. He was certain, according to some, to make his way in the world; according to others to set the Thames on fire. He himself seemed to be content with anticipating a curious delight, that of astonishing the Natives. But all, except himself, disallowed these triumphs except he fulfilled the condition precedent of concentration.

"You'll see, Uncle Drury," said Fred's mother to her bald and dignified old brother-in-law, as she sat and chatted with him one Saturday after lunch in her drawing-room at Maida Vale, "that dear Fred will be all right when he's married. He only wants time to turn round and settle down, and then you see if he doesn't concentrate. Cinty will keep him steady. He will always have an object before him. Depend upon it, there's nothing like a wife, for keeping an Object in view."

Uncle Drury weighed eighteen stone, and always rumbled in his chest before he spoke, like the works of a big clock before it strikes. Then he made an exclamation, which perhaps should be written "'pshaw!" as you would have said he was a likely old gentleman to say 'pshaw! But then nobody knows, nowadays, how it was pronounced in the days of port wine and walnuts. A neophonetic system must be followed here.

"Charchar!"—that was what it sounded like—"Charchar! Don't tell me about Wives and Objects. If a wife makes her husband concentrate, well and good! If not, she may just as well be at Jericho. You are quite at liberty to tell her I said so, if you like, Emilia. Jericho!" Uncle Drury repeated the word forcibly, as though it had a strong geographical pungency, and was fraught with alienation to a greater extent than Coventry, or even Blazes. He then blew a sostenuto blast on his nose; it ought to have heralded a proclamation, and the silence that followed was a disappointment.

"You are always hard on the boy, Uncle Drury," said his

sister-in-law. And as this didn't seem to arise strictly from the conversation, it may be assumed that it was a family remark, liable to be encountered in the course of any communion between the speakers, sooner or later. This time the headmaster of Vexton Stultifer school—for the Rev. Dr. Carteret had that degree of importance—seemed inclined to follow it up.

"Not at all so, Emilia, not at all so! It is unfair to say so." He intensified his meaning with a frown and a forefinger, as soon as the hand it was on had stowed away his recent pocket-handkerchief. "Most unfair! When—your—boy, Emilia, was in the first form, I said the same about him that I say now. Simple lack of concentration! And I can tell you this, Emilia—and you may just as well listen. . . ."

"I know perfectly well what you are going to say."

"Perhaps you do. Perhaps you don't. Anyhow, if that boy had been left in my hands, to manage my own way . . ."

"He was a boy in your school. Why didn't you manage him your own way?"

"You are quite right, Emilia. I used the wrong expression. I did not mean to suggest the least that you impeded or encumbered my management of him. On the contrary, you kept loyally to your undertaking to give me a free hand. What I meant to say was . . ." But it seemed to call for a little reconsideration, for the Doctor paused over a pinch of snuff to amend it for publication. "I should say perhaps that what I ought to have said was that, all the circumstances taken into consideration, I was the wrong tutor for him. A brother's son is not like another boy, nor perhaps . . ." He stopped abruptly, as a speaker stops who knows what he is going to say, but leaves it unsaid.

"You know that I don't agree with you about that. Was it not his father's wish that you should always take charge of the boy?"

"Yes—yes—that was so. Was so certainly, I should say. . . . Yes—what were you going to say?"

"Nothing. Only that we have said all this before, and I see no use going over it again. We shall never agree. Let us talk of something else. Besides, it remains to be seen that my boy Frederic will *not* distinguish himself."

"I shall be very happy to hear of it, when he does."

"Now you are speaking as if you doubted his ability. We had better not talk about him. It always puts you out when I speak of him."

THE OLD MADHOUSE

"You know perfectly well, Emilia, that that is not the case. But, as you say truly, we gain nothing by pursuing this conversation. Let us speak on some other subject."

"By all means. Let us." But neither did. It is very difficult to make arbitrary choice of a subject of conversation.

It took time—not much, but some—for this slight threatening of a breeze to die down. During its subsidence this lady's face certainly looked comely; indeed, under the stimulus of a momentary vexation, it looked more. It looked, and was, beautiful. But there was no one there to see except the reverend headmaster, and he was not concerned with such matters. Besides, he had known her over thirty-five years, and she was his brother's widow. So he took snuff and looked at the fire, not at her. His face had claims too, and meant to have more when he grew still older and whiter. It was massive and commanding anyhow, and the sneeze that followed a pinch of snuff shook the glass vases on the marble top of the curvilinear chiffonier at the far end of the Victorian drawing-room where they sat, and made them ring. He appeared to wait for the echo to die; and then, as though it had asked for the right time, looked at his watch and said twenty-to-three.

"Must you go?" said his sister-in-law. "I don't mean must you go now if that train is to be caught. I suppose that's inevitable. I mean wouldn't to-morrow do as well?"

"No, hardly—hardly! I want a few hours to read through my letters. Besides, I've told them at the hotel. However, I needn't go for a few minutes. I shall find a cab on the stand."

Evidently, a short chat would fill out those few minutes, with a further oblivion for the tiff. "You always make a great point of the first day of the term, Dru," said the lady, as keynote for such a chat. "But an hour or so late wouldn't matter, if you went on Monday morning. I see that you have to be there."

"Absolute necessity," said the headmaster. "Absolute necessity! What would happen if I were *not* there, when the boys assemble on Monday, the Lord only knows!" He seemed to be picturing to himself a Chaos in the school at his defection, and to be amused at it. "To do the boys justice, I believe they would be as much upset at the incident as it is in the nature of boys to be at anything. If they could make me miss my train, themselves, they would regard it all as strictly in order, and rather a *lark*, in their phraseology. But, for the thing to happen of its own accord! Never do—never do at all!"

"If they were set to scour the country to find you, they would appreciate *that*."

"Bless my soul yes, that they would! But then, after that, they wouldn't be contented unless a master was missing every day." He seemed enormously amused at the picture that this developed in his imagination; probably that of a school subject to the daily deficit of an important master, under these conditions. But he enjoyed it in silence, with a twinkle on his face; and this fragment of chat having served its turn as an antidote to whatever there was controversial in the previous one, the lady thought it unnecessary to say anything further.

A cat on the hearthrug, that had slept through the conversation, thought the silence a good opportunity to stretch itself and turn round. A dachshund, that had been grilling inside the fender, came over it suddenly as to a business appointment, smelt the cat carefully, decided that no steps could be taken at present, and went back. A little quickstep gold watch on the chimney-piece kept well alongside the solemn pace of a neighbouring clock, but made no effort to fall in and keep time. The post came, and the lady said Lipscombe would bring it in; but it wasn't till Lipscombe had brought it in, and she herself was biting a thoughtful lip over its contents, that the reverend headmaster said, as one who sums up Time-to-date:—"Well—all very good, so far! And now I must be off, or I shan't have time to see over this house. It's a perfectly crazy idea to take such a huge place, but I can't veto the scheme without seeing it."

"How long will it take you to drive there?"

"In a cab? Over an hour."

"And when you have seen the house, you will have to drive to Wimbledon. How long will that take?"

"I shall not keep the cab. I shall walk to Wimbledon. I shall catch the five-thirty from Waterloo. But I haven't too much time. . . . Oh yes—time enough, but not too much." He declined to have a four-wheeler sent for, and was heard talking to himself down the stairs, or replying to their creaks as they acknowledged his eighteen stone. His sister-in-law listened to his exit, and returned to her letter.

She expected to see the old boy again shortly—at her son's wedding at any rate, if not earlier—and the slight asperity of their recent talk was not of a sort to call for a reconciliation; scarcely a tiff, in fact. But she was mistaken, for she never saw him again.

CHAPTER II

SOMETIMES summer is in such a hurry in England that it comes in spring, and finding it too cold goes away disgusted and never comes back. It had done so this time, as far as the premature arrival went, and the bicycling season had set in early. Cinty Fraser and her sister Elbows were bicycling up from Gipsy Hill, Upper Norwood, to lunch at Mrs. Carteret's and go to the Sunday afternoon service at St. Paul's at three o'clock, with Fred. And of course they were not obliged to go to church in the morning, too. Anyhow, they weren't going, that was flat!

Cinty's real name was Cintra, not Cynthia, and her sister's wasn't Elbows at all. It was Ann; or, for speech, Nancy. The name Elbows was not known to either Cintra or herself. But she was known by it to Fred, who was engaged to her younger sister; and spoken of too by it by his intimate bosom friend Snaith, whenever he honoured her by mentioning her to that cheeky young upstart of an attorney. This was the way in which Elbows, or Ann, spoke of *him*. She may have had some suspicion of the way in which *he* spoke of *her*, and it may have vitalised her epithets. She certainly was hardly a beauty, though her face was very refreshing; and she *was* angular. But she could bicycle.

"Of all the sickening neighbourhoods," said she to her sister. She seemed to think the sentence would do, with no further addition. They were in a suburban desolation, a district of Estates that had matured, and were ripe for building, but looked as if they would disagree with the stomach of the metropolis that was going to assimilate them. Estates on which an infatuated anticipation of a beery world had planted, with feverish haste, at the street corners of its credulity, ginshops and pot-houses deserted by hypothesis, but nursing a belief that trade would look up. Fields were there, or places where there had been fields, overrun at right angles by roads, or places where there were to be roads. Old suburban homes were there, trying to forget the voices of their last tenants—trying to make believe that others would be found to come and take them at a rental that would console the maturity of their estate for the loss of so

much valuable frontage to the main road; murmuring to themselves, in the person of the young man from Smith's the house-agent, that they were really in substantial repair, and only wanted a touch of paint and repapering throughout, and maybe the shutter fastenings would want looking to, while as for the drains the last tenant had had them overhauled quite lately, but you could see for yourself.

Such a house was The Cedars, a derelict in a desert, a close-shuttered survivor of the years gone by; a courageous adventurer into its Future of change—change for the worse! If the two trees it had its name from ever spoke of their past to each other, it must have been to say that their worst anticipations were come true. For the rooms that had looked out upon them in the days when their lawn was a mowing-machine's delight, when the great iron gate you could see them through now could really be unlocked with a key to let your carriage in, and its wheels could sound its expectation of hospitality awaiting you over a gravel path clean-weeded day by day—those rooms were eyeless now to see them as of old, and tenantless within. Even the rats had fled to seek unconsumed larders elsewhere. Nothing was left to interrupt the leisurely Decay; to interfere with the worm's last supper on the mouldered joist, the last nibble of the half-starved mouse from the fallen wallpaper strip upon the floor. And in the garden the dandelion, and a blue corncockle here and there, meant soon to have the lonely place to themselves, till the polygonum should come and take over the inheritance. But for many seasons after the big gate was last locked you might have looked through it and smelt the roses as they made their fight for life against the weeds; while field and garden without fell, year by year, to the coming town, and the pothouse-spotted desolation grew.

Through this desolation rode the bicyclists, and the younger one made no attempt to defend it. On the contrary, she seemed quite prepared to endorse it.—“This is the very sickeningest,” said she, completing her sister's unfinished comment. She had to shout loud, because she was in front, as she continued:—“But you know Freddy and I are in love with The Cedars. We are sure it must be haunted. Only—the roof! And the floors!! And the sewers!!!”

“Is that where the child's toy was?”

“My stars, Nancy, how you do remember things! A doll stuck through a broken drum. From last time it was a nursery. You're touched, I suppose?”

"You're an unfeeling little pig. Go on if you're going on. Or else let me pass. . . ."

"There's no room. You'll be in the ruts. Or knock me in. And it's wet clay. . . ." But in a few seconds clean dry ground was reached; and Nancy, far the better bicyclist, came up alongside, enabling her sister to drop her voice to normal. "I am all for taking The Cedars. But they want fifteen hundred for the twenty years unexpired. And it will cost every penny of four to put it in even decent repair."

Nancy had a matter-of-fact, confiding nature, which had given way to the spoiled self-assertion—called pertness by Fred's uncle, and cheek by his friend Mr. Snaith—of her pretty younger sister Cinty. So she accepted that young monkey's statement that four hundred pounds would repair The Cedars with a full belief in some qualifying experience, acquired Heaven knows when, of prices per foot-super of slates and flooring, and painting and glazing and whitewashing and "sanitation." All of which Cinty really knew nothing about. She enlarged upon the subject nevertheless, and the dexterity with which she paraded her few data imposed on her sister's simplicity, and prompted the latter, in the present case, to say:—"What a lot you have got to know about it, Cit!" And Cit responded:—"As much as most people, I suppose"—rather scornfully, and made Elbows feel that she was behind the times about sanitation.

"You never told us, at home, about The Cedars, Cit," said she, rather reproachfully. For the Fraser family were old-fashioned, and all of them told their day's story over the evening dinner-table to all the others.

"Yes, I did—where the child's toy was. . . ."

"Oh yes—you told us that. But not about the repairs and the estimate, and all that sort of thing."

"Well—there wasn't any estimate. It was all vague." Perhaps Cintra then felt she had been talking at random, for a semi-self-exculpation followed. "Besides, there's lots of places we've looked at I haven't told you about. I can't remember them all."

They then rode on side-by-side along the level road. Nancy felt rather chilled and crushed by hearing that information had been withheld; perhaps had a foreboding of the family-disruption-feeling that was to come with the wedding. This does not dawn because of a mere betrothal, which may be forgotten tomorrow. But when it comes to house-hunting . . . !

However, Nancy was not badly chilled, only a little. Not so

little though but what her sister knew all about it, sisterwise, and fashioned her speech towards amends-making.

"Of course one means to tell, and then one doesn't. There's such lots of things. However, I *did* mean this one—so you needn't look so glum, Nancy dear. . . . Here's a motor coming! Look out!" A whirl, a roar, two pair of goggles, a dust-cloud, and a stench one hopes Chemistry is ashamed of! "Oh dear!—what I was saying has gone out of my head. That beastly thing!"

"I'm not glum. Oof!—wait till this stench is done. . . . There! Now tell. Wasn't the house too big, apart from the repairs?"

"Well—you saw it."

"Yes, and it looked too big. It's five windows wide, and a sort of schoolhouse—built on to it."

"It *was* a school, you know. . . ."

"Cinty dear, aren't you rather a goose?"

"I don't see it. What for?"

"Why!—to so much as think of taking a great huge house with eighteen bedrooms! You *are* a goose." Nancy seemed to think there was no doubt about it.

"I don't see it. Half of it would let. The annex-building would always let. And the large room at the back would do for Frederic's workshop." Cintra had sometimes a tendency to drop "Fred." She had a sense of the coming dignity of real marriage, and this was a tribute to it. She continued:—"And the side drawing-room with the handsome mantelpiece for Frederic's library. And the little off-room on the stairs for a sort of Office. There wouldn't be any rooms going begging. You may be sure of that." She continued developing the subject, suggesting to her hearer more and more the idea that she had given up the prospect of life at The Cedars with reluctance.

But then, Nancy reflected, she had been quite as keen yesterday about a flat in Westminster with a beautiful view over the park. If Nancy had had more experience of young couples nesting, she would have known that they all go through an ecstatic period of house-inspection, and that while the fever is on them the object of life is not to arrive at a decision, but to see new premises; that the obvious unsuitability of each new find only acts as a stimulus to closer examination of it on its merits; and that the raising of the expectations of lessors and vendors to the highest possible pitch is a delirious joy, which only reaches its climax after repeated visits by appointment and inter-

views with builders and surveyors, when it becomes manifest that if only the north rooms had looked south and the south rooms north, or there hadn't been any rent to pay, to speak of; or if it had been on gravel instead of clay, or five miles nearer town—why, then they would have taken it at once, but as it is can only decide in the negative and enjoy the execrations of their victims, and go away and see still more premises, and more, and more. Miss Cintra Fraser and Mr. Frederic Carteret were in fact—over and above being in a seventh heaven of Love—in an eighth or ninth or tenth heaven of almost solid air-castle building, with real live proprietors and house-agents worked in, who experienced real annoyance when their bubbles burst; and who, as their tormentors stirred up the soap for a new one, made real resolutions that they would never be taken in in the same way again, and were.

"Yes," said Cintra, as they drew near to a main road with a stream of traffic, where conversation was going to be impossible, "it's very trying having to give up the idea of The Cedars, when I know it could be made do. And you know, Nance, you can't have a room there to do your enamels, and a gas-furnace, and come every day, and we could work it a' together. . . . Oh, how I do hate this dreadful road! Three snorters already!"

"You can always catch hold of the handles," says Miss Nancy, whose normal form on a bicycle is to put her hands behind her back or in her pockets, except when she is promoting intercourse between her nose and her pocket-handkerchief. Or, of course, when she wants to romp along the road like a Demon—this expression is borrowed from a young friend of ours, a bicyclist. But when crawling seven miles an hour, Nancy could read net six-shilling volumes as easily as not.

The two young ladies arrived an hour later at Maida Vale, without casualty. Both said, as they alighted:—"Saved our lives!"

Cinty said to Nancy:—"That was a near squeak between the bus and that red horror." And Nancy replied that if you were going to fuss about that sort of thing you had better give up riding at once. "Perhaps I had, dear," said Cinty.

The little dachshund answered the bell, and had the street door and garden gate opened. He then overhauled the bicycles—attended to the tyres and the lubrication—till his attention was called away by some friends across the road.

"Has Mr. Frederic come, Lipscombe?"

"I believe not, Miss." Lipcombe leads a life of cautious reserves, behind a white apron. She takes sixteen pounds, and might even ask eighteen if she were just an inch longer. But it is just that inch that makes the difference, in a parlour maid. She sheds bitter tears over that missing inch, and often prays for a high fever that she may grow it in a week. But no burning quotidian tertian comes to Lipcombe's rescue, and she remains five-feet-four.

"I hope nothing's happened to Fred." Cintra, who speaks, is unconsciously awayed by a great natural Law—the one which makes us all believe we are safe because we are not somewhere else. Other people are, and you never know what may not have happened. Now, Cinty and Nancy, between Gipsy Hill and Maida Vale, had been twenty times within an ace of death—especially that time when both were between a tram going one way and a Daimler going the other—and Mr. Fred had only to come from his chambers. Safe enough, in all conscience! But then these girls, in their relation to themselves, were on the spot, and knew all about it. So Cintra hoped, conversationally, that nothing had happened to Fred, and exposed herself to the derision of her sister.

Nothing had happened; and the young man himself, arriving close on their heels, had evidently not been uneasy about *them*. He was quite full of a New Idea, an awfully good one. He always was, but this time it was an awfully better than usual one. And he shut out the returning dachshund unfeelingly, he was so full of it.

"I think it's the best notion yet, far and away," said he, exultingly. "It came into my head over that ship-propeller business, and really I've been awake all night thinking it out. I've got it now, down to the ground."

"You are so clever, dearest!" said Cintra.

"But you've shut Liebig out," said Nancy. For that was actually the name of this dog, and he was dabbing the gate and singing a most pathetic song about a little black dachshund that got shut out of a front garden in Maida Vale. Miss Nancy carried him upstairs, going on in front of the lovers; but whether to give them greater latitude or because she was not exactly nuts upon her future brother-in-law, who can say? She certainly had used that expression about him, in confidence to friends; also, she was sure he spoke of her disparagingly to that odious Snaith creature. Only she didn't know that he called her "Elbows."

Of course Miss Ann, or Nancy, Fraser was rather a plain girl,

and at three-and-twenty was not likely to be anything else. But she made no claims, and was to all appearance content without admirers. So she had a right to ask to be exempt from overhauling and classification, horsewise. Surely when Amaryllis isn't asking you to sport with her in the shade, you needn't go out of your way to call her gawky. If Neacra has not placed the tangles of her hair at your disposal, but brushed them flat and screwed them up tight, it isn't fair to reflect upon their quantity; when, for anything you know, there might be heaps if it was let out. Nor to ascribe motives to Neacra because she doesn't dress in a low neck. Until you've seen her in a low neck, or at least a V, you really can't tell. And the expression "collar-bones" is inexcusable in any case, because they are a bone which is never imperceptible, except in Dowagers of full habit. But admirers who were not so narrow-minded as to be susceptible only to mere impact, might have inserted a note of admiration after Nancy's eyes. Surely they were the very frankest eyes that you never cared to examine carefully enough to see if they were grey or hazel.

We are saying all this to counteract, if possible, an impression you must have derived from the detestable epithet "Elbows." It would have been much fairer to say at once that Nancy was a reasonably comely girl who held her possibly bony self upright; had smooth brown hair, a slightly warped nose and pleasant eyes, and could whistle like a boy—and then allow Mr. Fred's disparagement to do its worst. And it would have saved time, which is very necessary now that we are not mid-Victorians.

Nancy's indifference to her own looks may have been somehow connected with her susceptibility to beauty in other women. Nancy was always in love. She would lie awake like an over-excited boy after an evening at the play or the opera, quite upset by Columbine or the prima donna. She bought and stored photos of celebrated beauties whom you wouldn't have wished her to make bosom friends of. She would recognise fascinating exteriors in carriages when she was out biking with her sister; and when the latter asked her how she knew, replied that she had cut Lady Clachandrumdalloch out of the *Graphic*, and she was quite sure it was her. But she did not adore Beauty in its Zenith only. Age could not wither it, nor custom stale its infinite variety, for her; and although Frederic's mother was in her fifties, it may easily be that its dignified remains in her were what made Nancy love their owner better than her pending

brother-in-law. Anyhow, Mrs. Carteret—freely spoken of as “the mother-hen” by her *bête-noire*, Snaith—was the reason why a visit to Maida Vale was always welcome to Cinty’s sister; and this time she felt very content to leave the two spoonies to a prolonged stairclimb, and to hurry up to the lady of the house in the drawing-room.

The mother-hen was recently back from church, and seemed *distracte* over some botanical incident in the greenhouse above the projecting street-door block. The sweet air of the premature summer morning brought in a smell of warm red geranium plants; not a smell of flowers certainly, but something that was just as serviceable towards an impression that to-day was like when one was a child, and was taken walks and bowled one’s hoop.

“I suppose it’s almost lunch. I must go. . . . Is that you, Cintra? . . . Oh no! . . . Miss Fraser, is it?” For Nancy was Miss Fraser, and there were two between her and her sister; one dead, another married and gone to live at Brighton. Miss Fraser was allowed to kiss Mrs. Carteret, and was glad. The dog, Liebig, tried to mix himself up in this affair, and got checked.

“I’ll put him down, Mrs. Carteret—he’ll tear your *voile*—it’s lovely!” But Liebig is conscious of a cat, and is keen to abolish or adjust it before he reaches the ground, and bursts away with a wriggle. The rescued lavender net is a cloud over lavender silk, and the gloves Mrs. Carteret is rolling up are lavender. Her eyes are not exactly lavender, but they are of the same school as the *voile* and the skirt and the gloves. After a short acquaintance, one feels that Mrs. Carteret’s name, Emilia, is a lavender-coloured name. She is a sensitive person about dress, who always smells of new gloves, and now she is anxious to get those bicycle-things off those two girls before the second luncheon bell.

“You’ll find everything ready upstairs.” She is referring to non-bicycle skirts, prearranged. Lipscombe sees to all that.

“I’ll go. I shall be quicker than Cinty. I always am. We’ve had a delicious ride.”

“Which way did you come?”

“I don’t know how to describe. Not the straight way. We came round to get a sight of a house. One of the houses Cit and Fred want to take. A lovely old house to look at, outside—only so big! We hadn’t time to stop and go in.”

“Not The Cedars?”

"Yes, that was the name. Such a dear old place with two great Cedars of Lebanon on the lawn, and all going to decay. A perfect place to live in."

Mrs. Carteret smiled sedately! "Just the place for a young couple with a small income! It's the place my boy is always raving about—the madhouse, that was."

"Was it a madhouse? Cit never told me that." Nancy's voice shrank, conscious of the horror of madhouses.

"Perhaps she doesn't know. Fred may not have told her."

"She won't want to live there when she does know. A madhouse!"

"Oh, as to their taking it, of course that's absurd! His guardian would never consent to anything so ridiculous."

"Of course he wouldn't!" Nancy felt safe, directly, as an image of the Rev. Drury passed across her mental retina. "If he were to see the place only from the outside, he would put his foot down at once. I'm sure he would."

"Oh, for that matter, he *has* seen it. At least, I believe so. He went straight away to look at it after he was here to lunch yesterday, and I hope he caught the five-o'clock train. Now, my dear Miss Fraser, do forgive me! But really it's ten minutes to one, and remember you have to be at St. Paul's by three."

"All right, Mrs. Carteret. I shall be ready before Cit. You see if I'm not."

"Oh—such a disappointment!" Thus the bride-elect to her elector, awaiting her in the drawing-room. The bicycle skirt has disappeared, and the limbs it almost made a parade of—certainly was not sensitive about—have retired into private life. Cintra is a young lady again!

"What's the disappointment?" says Fred.

"The Cedars."

"What about The Cedars?"

"Your Uncle Drury says it's too big. I suppose it is." This is said most ruefully.

"Oh rot! Besides, Uncle Drury hasn't seen it. How can he tell?" Cintra, keeping rueful, checks false conclusions with a corrective headshake, and says:—"He *has* seen it. He went there after he came here on Thursday. And he says it's too big. Heaps! Besides, it was a madhouse. It was, wasn't it? You said so." This is addressed to Nancy, who is bringing up the rear, re-skirted up to Society point.

Nancy is truthfulness itself, and won't stand inaccuracy or

exaggeration. "Yes—that's all right!" says she. "About the madhouse. But I didn't say Dr. Carteret said it was too big after he'd seen it. He said that before. Then he went away to look at it, and catch the five-o'clock train." It speaks volumes for Nancy's veracity that she adds:—"If possible."

"What did he say after? That's what I want to know."

"Nothing—at least, I don't know. You must ask Mrs. Carteret." At this point Mr. Fred, who has remained outside the discussion with visible mistrust in his eye of all young ladies' testimony on all subjects, appends a side-note. Yes—that's the idea! Ask his mother, who is just coming downstairs.

But that lady has after all nothing to tell. "My dear Freddy," she says, shrugging her shoulders with a slight action of hands that lay an indisputable truth open to Heaven and Earth:—"You know your Uncle. Is it likely he would write? He said positively the house was far too big—so it is!—but he supposed he must see over it, as a matter of form. Then he went away, and no doubt saw over it. I don't expect to hear from him yet and very likely he won't write at all."

"Yes!" said Mr. Frederic. "That's just like Uncle Drury."

"Perhaps," suggested Cintra, "it made him change his mind."

"Not he!" replied Fred. "He is Obstinacy itself, like the Pyramids." Nobody quarrelled with the metaphor, but that may have been because Lipscombe said lunch was on the table. The little dachshund pretended that he had said it, and went down first to the dining-room.

Pending his particular concession of roast mutton, invariable on Sundays, Mr. Fred had an item of news to tell. Who did the public generally think was engaged to be married? The public guessed wrong, and gave it up. Why—Charley! The public was incredulous, on the ground that no one of Mr. Snaith's personality could possibly have engaged the affections of a sex whose good taste is proverbial. "He is engaged, for all that!" said his friend, not without a certain triumph in his voice. "And, what's more, to a very pretty girl. He's engaged to a Miss Hinchliffe." Incredulity seemed abashed by so circumstantial a name. It might have ignored or slighted Smith or Brown, but Hinchliffe was a name to make you sit up and think. Mrs. Carteret went the length of wondering whether the young lady was one of those Hinchliffes. Her son said he thought she was—he didn't know. But there was money. She said thereon that then it was pretty sure to be those Hinchliffes. Miss Nancy said you might trust Mr. Snaith for that, and Mr.

Fred said:—"No—really Charley's not that sort of fellow." Public opinion turned favourably for Mr. Snaith, and silenced Miss Nancy. Then the tendency of this new *fiancée* to occupy a place in History was nipped in the bud by Mrs. Carteret suddenly recollecting that those Hinchliffes were not Hinchliffes, but Hinchcliffes. It took time to reinstate Mr. Snaith's Miss Hinchliffe after this shock. But it was done, and Mr. Fred stuck to the money, which saved her from extinction.

Then that young gentleman announced that his fertile brain had conceived a ripping idea.

"Well!" said Nancy. And the others said:—"Well!" to encourage the ripping idea, as the young gentleman seemed to have announced its existence before maturing it.

"What's to prevent the Hinchliffes . . ."

"Mr. and Mrs. Nosey, I suppose," interjected Nancy.

"Why—of course! Who else could they be?"

"Don't squabble with Nance, Fred. Go on. 'What's to prevent?' you were saying?" Cintra knew it was best to nip discussion of this sort in the bud.

"What's to prevent The Cedars being made two houses of, and them having one and us the other?"

"Of course! Perfectly splendid! The very thing! Why *did* we never think of it before?" Cintra laid down her knife and fork to think of it now.

Fred proceeded to elaborate the ripping idea. There were two staircases, and the way in which one of the rooms would lend itself to conversion into a second entrance-lobby and a convenient annex was little short of miraculous—could only be accounted for on the supposition that Destiny had foreseen the present conjunction of circumstances, and had lent herself to their development. He was able to locate the new kitchen in the more modern wing of the house, without trenching on its resources of space. In fact, whatever you did, there would still be unlimited spare rooms. His faith in the inexhaustible resources of the mansion naturally provoked reference to the fact that but a few minutes ago he had been discussing it as suitable for one young couple to begin life in, with margins no greater than prudent foresight demanded.

"I must say," said Fred's sedate mother, from her pinnacle of toleration for these crude young people's wild schemes, "that I do not think Uncle Drury was so very far out when he condemned the house as absurdly large. Absurdly!"

Her son hastened to explain that his own cautious tempera-

ment had in fact long since forced him to this conclusion, and that he had virtually negatived the idea unless some such scheme of partition should suggest itself. He wondered that this one had not occurred to him immediately on Charley's announcement of his felicity yesterday. But really his head had been so full of his new Anti-Vibration Duplex Engine that he could think of nothing else.

"You are so clever!" said his *fiancée*, with reverent eyes fixed on him, awestruck at this last new outcome of his genius. His mother took absolutely no notice of the Duplex Engine. It was only one of a thousand schemes, behind each of which stood Opulence, painted full of dividends, only waiting concentration on the part of its originator. There now!—if Fred would only concentrate!

Mrs. Carteret ignored the Duplex, and passed to another topic. Who was it said this house had been a madhouse? She asked the question, but got nothing for answer except repetitions. Who was it?

Cintra recollected. "Stop, I know!" said she. "It wasn't the dried-up caretaker. And it wasn't the old husband. It must have been the agent's where we got the order to view—the first time we went."

"Not very likely," said Fred. "He wants to let the place. Besides, I remember what he said. He said it had been a doctor's private residence till seven years ago, and we were not to take anything for true that the old woman said, because she was half-witted, and her husband little better."

"I think," said Mrs. Carteret, addressing Fred, "I can see where the madhouse story came from. Your Uncle Drury repeated to me all that—about the doctor—and then said, in his positive way:—'A madhouse, of course!' You know your uncle's positive way?"

"Rather!" said Fred. Then he appeared to recollect for a moment, and ended by saying:—"Yes—that was how it was. I told him about the doctor, and that the agent said he and his father before him had had the house for over sixty years, and then Uncle Drury said:—'I see—madhouse, of course.' I thought he must know, somehow or other."

"But you never told me," said Cintra.

"Because you're a delicate young female," said the youth, somewhat on his defence, but brazening it out. "Delicate young females don't take to madhouses and horrors."

Then he changed his tone, to keep on safe ground. "No—I

thought it would only give you the creeps. Besides, perhaps it wasn't true."

"I prefer being told things," says the young beauty, a little stiffly. "Whether they are false or true."

"Even if it's ghosts?"

"Certainly. Even if it's ghosts. So now you know, and mind you don't do so any more." The young gentleman expresses contrition and docility, as a discreet lover, and the ripple dies on the waters.

"Reconciliation and forgiveness!" says Nancy, illustratively. For her part, she added, she thought Fred had been very good and considerate, and Cit might think herself in luck. And as for ghosts, they would be interesting and not a drawback, unless they were the sort that broke things. Perhaps, however, these last would rank as phenomena, not ghosts.

Mrs. Carteret dissociated herself from such a trivial, mock scientific tone. "I think it quite possible," said she, "that your Uncle Drury won't write. If he does not, you may take it for granted that he thinks The Cedars out of the question. I feel sure."

Said Mr. Fred, thereon:—"Of course I can't write to him about The New Scheme without sounding Charley about it first."

"And Miss Hinchliffe," says Cintra. She looks after the interest of brides. They are not to be cyphers.

"Of course Miss Hinchliffe. They'll settle it between 'em. I say, Cit, wouldn't it be rather a lark to get them down to the house for them to see—without telling them anything, you know—and then spring The Scheme on them suddenly?"

"Oh do!—to-morrow if you can. Don't let's lose an hour. The place may be taken *any* minute." This is Cintra. Her sister had been very reserved since Mr. Snaith was imported into the air-castle. Then when a provisional forecast is made of an excursion in force to The Cedars on Thursday, she says she thinks the Metcalfes are expecting her on Thursday. She has already said:—"Rather Miss Hinchliffe than me!" in an undertone to her sister, *apropos* of some supposed contingency involving that young person and her adorer. Fred says to Cintra afterwards:—"I shall convert your ferocious sister to Charley for all that, some day. You see if I don't!"

CHAPTER III

"THAT'S what some do say it was—a madhouse. Others says it was a Loonattick Asylum." This is what the deaf old woman in charge of The Cedars said to the Rev. Drury Carteret, when he had shouted three times:—"Is this The Cedars?" and once, when he found this form of question fail:—"Is this the madhouse?"

The old woman showed no alacrity to open the gate, and raised an objection. Had the reverend gentleman an order to view? No, he had not, but he had a shilling. He showed it, and it caused a smaller gate lower down to be opened and admitted him to the garden.

He looked very overpowering and important as he crushed the gravel ahead of his conductor. She flagged in his rear, rapid progress being incompatible with the secretion of the shilling in an old purse that would not shut. He turned, on arriving at the Tuscan portico, whose silvery Portland stone, rich with moss and stonecrop, had seemed alone worth the rent to the infatuated young couple who were rebuilding the house as an air-castle. The old woman seemed to have said something, and to be saying it again, for the first words the Rev. Drury distinguished were:—"I was a saying would you mind being kep' a minute while I go round to undo the door? . . . No—I never come out at it." This last is in answer to:—"I suppose it has blown to with the wind. Yes, certainly—certainly!" He waits, interested in a hole his stick's ferule fits into, until the sound comes of shooting bolts and a rattling chain, and the door opens. The caretaker perhaps interprets her visitor's severe aspect as provoked by this detention on the doorstep, for she is voluble in apology, catching up a clue from her last words.

"No—I never come out at this door, bein' it's none so easy to open, owin' to the 'andle being loose, and indeed not kep' in the door by reason of falling out when not held, so put on the winder-seat on the left when not wanted, and as like as not a mistake all the while. I just stepped out by the side entrance, and was a going to the side gate, only I see you pay the cab." A little attention will connect the ideas in this sentence. She went on to a second chapter. "Excusin' for not asking you

round, but sech a way and no time saved, and indeed only through the sleepin' apartments and not fit. And on'y the other day Grewbeer was a complainin' about how slovenly."

"Grewbeer being . . .?" His interrogatory stop is good for pupils in a *viva voce*, but quite useless with an old deaf woman.

"Hay?" This is all the questioner gets, in a tone suggesting that he is needlessly obscure.

The consequence is a sound of aggressive toleration in his voice, and an offensive mechanical clearness in his manner. "Who—is—the—person you are referring to? Your husband?"

"Ah!"

"Very good. Then you are Mrs. Grewbeer. Now—where's the drawing-room?" His headmaster deportment seems to suggest—as the position of a cross-examiner—that the old woman has been keeping back her surname, which he has "elicited" against her will; and that she has been delaying his introduction to the drawing-room, from malice aforethought.

The consequence is that Mrs. Grewbeer is nettled, and remains nettled, in spite of that shilling. She withdraws the loose handle from the socket it had been held in to open its hasp, and then restores it to its window-seat after slamming the big door so as to wake the echoes through the empty house, and shows him into the drawing-room, saying combatively:—"There! There's your drawing-room for yer. Now how many shutters do you want set open? Have 'em all if you like. You've only got to say."

"One's enough. That'll do!"

"You can have 'em all if you like."

"One's enough, I tell you!" He raises his voice, as though to a neophyte who has been guilty of a false quantity.

"You've no call to fly out. There's your one window." He surveys the old wainscoted room, and appears to disapprove of it. The old woman remains with her hand on the shutter till leave comes to close it; then, as she does so, mutters what seems like:—"Ollerin' at one as if one was a 'orse in a cart!" Then the inspection of the house proceeds on the same terms, though rather more peacefully.

Uncle Drury certainly did his duty conscientiously. He examined every room in the huge mansion, and apparently decided, of each in turn, that it was unfit for human occupation. The only exploration he omitted was that of a straight passage,

without door or turning on either side, ending in a glass door which suggested a conservatory beyond, and was offensively filled with blue and red diamond panes. "Where does that go?" he asked, and shouted the question twice.

"That don't lead nowhere. Only the garden. Through the green'us."

"Front or back garden?"

"Front garden. Through the green'us, like I told you."

"Well—we won't waste any more time on *that*." He looked at his watch, and visibly thought it time to be off. He re-pocketed it, and then assumed an incisive air of business, to be transacted promptly. "Now, ma'am!" said he. "Perhaps you'll be so obliging as to answer me one or two questions."

"Hay?" Question repeated. "Suppose you was to ask 'em and see, master!"

Dr. Carteret accepted the suggestion. "First, what was the name of the doctor who lived in this house?"

"Couldn't rightly say. Choker, or Jolter."

"Are you sure it wasn't Aytcholt?"

"Might have been!—Yes—that was it! Aytcholt."

"I thought so. I needn't ask the other questions. Hadn't you better answer your bell?" For a distant bell had pealed furiously twice during this conversation.

The old woman took the hint and departed through the house. The last image on her mind of the Rev. Drury was massive, clerical, talking to itself and adjusting its coat and comforter to forestall the cold of the evening air. Her reflections on the interview, as she retraced the passages they had come through, took the form of a prediction that she would know the reverend gentleman if ever she came to see him again, anyhow!

But she never did, and no man or woman born ever saw Uncle Drury again alive.

The old woman went the quicker for a third pull at the bell, which was so vigorous that it had not knocked off work when she went out at the side door, and was still good for a parting clang when she reached the gate.

"You ain't in any hurry, missus," says the driver of a cart standing outside. "Howsomever, now you're on the job, maybe he'd better be got down and into the house. Lend a hand, young Toadstools!" This is to a youngster who is conversing with the horse, through the nose of the latter, as though it were an

"Lard's mercy!" says the old woman, seeing but not hearing. "Who've you got in that cart?" For a figure is crumpled up in the bottom of the cart, on some sacks which recently made claim to contain a chaldron of coke.

"Co 'dn't say, myself. My idea is you better cast your eye on him afore we shift him out, for fear he's the wrong man. He give me this address pretty plain. The Cedars is right, ain't it?"

"Oh lard yes!—that's here. It's my old man, if he said The Cedars. Tell me what's come to him, afore I look at his face."

"Oh, he ain't dead, if that's what you're a thinkin'. I'll go bail for that. Come along here and make sure."

Mrs. Grewbeer follows his finger to the cart-back, and he loosens the tilt to let her look in. Oh yes—that's her old man.

But she is visibly relieved when it becomes clear that though there has evidently been some mishap—enough to cause traces of blood and a plastered head—still a great deal of its owner's collapse is due to another cause. For he appears to be lodging a protest against the overmuch loquacity of his contemporaries.

"Let me up out o' this"—wrongly described—"cart, and shee if I don't larn some of you to poll-parrot, the wrong side o' your mouth. Nothin' but tork, tork, tork, nowadays!"

"That's him, for sure!" says his wife, recognising a familiar thesis of the speaker, through his half-articulate mumble. "Whatever have you been a taking of? He's fell down, I suppose?"

"That's about it, and the other old chap on top. Couldn't say how much they'd drunk between 'em—not to a half a pint."

The manner of this speech implies that sentiment would be wasted. The old woman becomes alive to the fact, saying:—

"You never mean he's been fighting, at his time o' life? Come along out, Benjamin!" The coke-dealer answers, as he helps the wounded man to his feet:—"Just a turn-up, not a set-to. Ah—he'll walk enough to get himself indoors! I'll lend a hand across the garden, and my son here he'll see to the horse. As you say, missus, he's getting on in life, for this sort of thing."

Some assistance is necessary; whether on account of contusion, or drunken helplessness, is not very clear. Probably the latter, as the coke-dealer sees the case. He goes away, after helping the old woman; probably because the injured man is intoxicated, not because he has a broken head; enjoining sobriety on his son, in a slight homily suited to the occasion. "You lay the warning to heart, young Toadstools, and don't get outside of a quart.

Inside of a quart—outside of the station 'us! That's the maximum for the guidance of the young. You keep to the figger when you're growed up! Just for now, bein' small, you don't hold above a harf a pint, and allowance is accordin'."

The postscript was no doubt due to a fear that the maximum or maxim, whichever the speaker meant, should have been worded differently for ears that were still in their early teens.

The condition of the old woman's husband, though not a novelty to her as far as Bacchus was concerned, was—so she said afterwards—plenty to make her forget all about the old parson, as she called the Rev. Drury. Indeed, it was not till next day, when her patient had slept off his drunkenness, and waked to find himself a mass of bruises and penitence, dominated by a stupendous headache, that she mentioned her clerical visitor, having all but forgotten him altogether in the interim.

"Where was he when I see the last of him?" she said, replying to a thrice-repeated question. "Why—in the passage over again the window-door of the green'us. Where the red and blue squares o' glass is. Just off to go, he was. I had to 'urry off for the bell."

"If he followed on, after you, how come you not to see him pass you, through the gate?" The old man asks this question after a good deal of reflection.

"Lard, Benjamin, how was I to have my eyes two ways at once? I'd all my work to do, lookin' after you. He ain't in the house now, you may take your oath of that, any day of the week."

"I ain't a fool, Alison. In course he's out o' the house by now. What I'm enquirin' of, now, is—when did he go out, and who see him?"

The old woman seemed to try to resolve this problem for the first time. "I should have let it stand," she said, "if you hadn't a arsted me, that he 'ung on like, seein' this and seein' that, till I was inside of the house, and then out o' the front door. And I don't see no other way now."

"Then Pritchett see him go—him as rode me home."

"He see no more than I did. He was in here till I got you lyin' down, and then I see him out and locked the gate."

"Then his young nipper see him!"

"That's as might be. A boy's a boy, and some on 'em takes notice. Some shets their eyes, or won't tel' You can't place no reliance."

"I never let nothing slip by me, when I was a boy. He sees

him fast enough, I lay. And he'll up and tell, if he don't think I want to know." Which showed knowledge of human nature. So did a remark which followed:—"In course the old party he was very 'appy to see no more of you, for to save his pocket. You may go bail he made very free with the money he'd have giv' if you'd 'a been there to take it. Only you wasn't."

The old woman, as soon as she had heard and understood, hastened to refute the accusation of illiberality. "Why—he'd giv' me a shilling in hand at the first go off," said she.

"What—and him a parson! To run to a shillin'! But there you are, ye see. In course he wouldn't stop, only to say good-evenin'!" So it remained provisionally understood that the reverend gentleman had slipped out somehow, between the time when Mr. Grewbeer was assisted into the house and the departure of Mr. Pritchett's coke-cart.

This theory was destined to be disturbed next day, when Mrs. Grewbeer was in conference with a handy young man who attended to small jobs in the way of repairs to the houses in charge of the agency which had appointed Mr. and Mrs. Grewbeer to the caretaking of The Cedars, years since. It had heeded her complaint of the ill-convenience occasioned by the loose door-handle, and her representation that it was really a locksmith's job, or Grewbeer could have made shift to attend to it. Mr. Grewbeer had, when appointed, claimed universal mechanical genius, and could turn his 'and to most anything you might name. But evil-disposed persons had thrown doubts on Mr. Grewbeer's attainments, and he had unfortunately not supplied his friends with precedents to quote in his favour, having made a nice 'ash of more than one undertaking; ascribing his failure in all cases to a lack of proper tools. Why, he couldn't—they said—so much as 'ack out a broke pane of winder-glass, much less shove in a new square and putty up! He alleged in reply that, if so be the agency aforesaid would advance him the price of a second-hand diamond, he would exhibit a rare and unparalleled skill in the glazier's art. But the agency had allowed itself to be influenced by interested advisers, and had entrusted its repairs, when nothing out of the way, to the 'andy young man just referred to. Thus it came about that, two days after Mr. Grewbeer had got that upset by the bad beer supplied by Sowerby's Entire to The Three Magpies, this young man, having took a shave off of the bottom of the dining-room door so it shouldn't stick, presented himself at the door of Mrs. Grewbeer's apartment and asked what was the next job. Being informed,

he said:—" 'Andle off the front door—is that it? Where shall I find the 'andle?"

"Where it belongs—only stood in loose, the screw bein' lost down a crack in the floorin'."

" 'Tain't in the door!"

"Then it's fell out and rolled on the ground."

" 'Tain't done no such thing. I ain't blind. The floor's there, missus. You can see for yourself."

The old woman finished peeling a potato, or rather, converting it into an irregular polyhedron, and threw away with the skin as much as she kept. Then she arose; and, brushing her apron, followed the handy young man to the floor that had not run away. His statements were obviously correct. No handle!

Then she looked puzzled, and well she might. For she had not been near that door—as it chanced—since she admitted the Rev. Dr. Carteret, two days since. She began to cogitate over her last dealings with that door. Of course—she had it, clear as daylight! She recalled that, when she closed it, she had replaced the handle on its window-seat, but had left the door unbolted. And then she had forgotten all about it, and no wonder!

A moment's thought, and a clearness came upon her. To be sure!—that was how the visitor had departed, through the door she had left unbolted. But—but—another moment's thought brought a new puzzle. He *could* not open the door, without the handle to pull back. Then, when he pulled it to behind him, it was bound either to retain the handle, or jerk it out on the floor. In neither case would it have got back to its place on the window-seat.

She explained her difficulty to the handy young man. Handy young men do not lightly admit they are at a loss. This one said:—"I don't take much accord o' that. This here old cock he's a careful sort of beggar, he is—hold-maidish, as they say. He says, says he, this here handle's a going to jump out when I slams, he says. So he just opens the door as quiet as a dormus, he does, and he outs with the 'andle and lays it on the shelf, he does. And then he bangs to the door and makes his lucky."

The intrinsic improbability of this defies belief, especially as the character ascribed to Dr. Carteret quarrels with the old woman's experience of him. But she does not see a way to refuting it on its merits, and raises a new issue. " 'Tain't any so easy to slam this door as you think, young man," says she. "Just you try it!"

"Easy enough if you ketch hold onto the knob outside. . . . Oh, there ain't no knob! Well—the old party ketched hold on the letter-box."

"Just you ketch hold on the letter-box, and try." The young man complies, and once, twice, three times, bangs to the door, shaking the house. That is enough. The hasp is set so that it overshoots the striking-plate—you know how that happens in a door?—and it will not go home of itself. The problem is more insoluble than ever.

The old man, in the further part of the desolate mansion, heard the concussions, and appeared on the scene in the course of time; not over quickly, because the handy young man had made good the defective handle—a short job—and was preparing to depart. The old woman's wits were still at work on the unsolved problem. How did the reverend visitor of two days since contrive his departure? She told her husband the incident of the door-handle, and explained the noises. Old Grewbeer affected sagacity, expressed contempt for all judgment but his own, especially his wife's, and certainly started a new hare. "Where did you see him last, did you say—hay?" he shouted to his wife. She replied as before—that the visitor was standing at the entry of the long passage with the glass door at the end. "Very well, then!" said her husband. "There's where he got out. 'Cos why? 'Cos he didn't get out anywheres else. You can't get over that, try your 'ardest!" Mr. Grewbeer was not the first person in the world to advance a variation of a statement as a reason for its truth.

"What—through all them empty flowerpots! Gone silly you are, Grewbeer, that's the truth. And how was he to get through that door without opening of it?"

"It's only glarst." This is too feeble to be worth an answer. The young man contributes a remark, showing zoological study. "Glass doors keeps elephants out, where they ain't allowed to break 'em." He prepares to go, but has a parting word of advice. "I should make a p'int of keeping my doors locked and bolted, if I was you. But of course I ain't, if you come to that." He departs through the door he has been at work upon, closing it gently from without, to show how it has benefited by his attention.

The old couple, instead of making for their own quarter, go away in the opposite direction, apparently by tacit consent. On the way, the old woman says:—"It's no use your goin'. I tell you it's locked." Her husband pays no attention, but stumps

on till he comes to the long passage, and so to the kaleidoscopic doorway. He opens it easily, and turns to his partner triumphantly. "Now, what did I tell ye?" says he. "Who's the fool now?" But his triumph is short-lived, for further exploration shows that the door of the greenhouse outside is so locked and bolted and the fastenings so immovable, that even in countries where elephants are given *carte-blanche*, a lazy one might have been discouraged from an attempt to open it.

Nevertheless, the old man considered that he had scored. He appeared to have taken up an attitude which a cultivated mind might have described thus, if not interrupted by the lower orders. Let X be the probability that a clerical gentleman can get through a conservatory, Y the number of its doors that are closed, and Z the number open. Then when $Z = 0$, X also $= 0$. But when $Y = Z$, clearly X is an even chance. The attitude was fallacious, as a single elephant-proof door remains a fixed integral. Mr. Grewbeer, however, hugged his opinion. Having imagined the passage of a kind of Bishop, in an apron, passing through the one door, he conceived that he had a sound ground on which to ignore the impossibility of the other. So it was with confidence that he approached the youthful son of the coke-merchant Pritchett, when a day or two later that advocate of sobriety looked in again at The Three Magpies, and abstained from the whole of its stock-in-trade except a quart of four-ale, minus the fraction he conceded to his offspring, who may, or may not, have been christened Toadstool Pritchett.

"I never see no helderly buffer," said Toadstool, in response to an enquiry from Mr. Grewbeer, which took the subject for granted, and sought to know whether that subject had departed up the road, down the road, or acrost the building land towards the rope-works. For the questioner had deemed it more subtle to take this line of examination, as leaving less latitude to the capricious inventiveness of boyhood. This boy seemed truthful. "And what's more there warn't none," said he. "I'd seen him if he'd been there, fast enough!"

"Who did you see, then? Don't you inwent!"

"I ain't inwentin'. I see a blind chap, feeling of his way along with a stick. And he got in the mud and they got him out and starved him on again, down the road. He'd got a dorg—wanted for to bite some of 'em for gettin' of him out. You don't mean him?"

"In course not. If I'd a meant a dorg, I'd have said a dorg. Who else did you see?"

"I see a young lady a walkin' out with a wolunteer. And he advised her to keep her hair on, he did. About a gurl by the name of Hemmer, he did. You don't mean neither of them?"

"Nouther the one nor yet the other. And not likely. They warn't gentlefolk. This here old cock was"—he paused for a phrase—"middlin' parlour-company, you might say. Soap afore dinner—that sort. And a clean pocket-ankercher, as often as not."

The last particular seemed to locate the quarrelsome couple socially, in the boy's mind. "They wasn't that sort," said he. "And as for the dorg's blind man, he was just a cadger. No—I see nobody else. Only them."

"What—see nobody come out at our gate! Then you wasn't looking."

"I was. I never took my eyes off of that gate, all the time. Nor yet off of the 'ouse gate, 'igher up. Nor yet off of any of the doors or winders or chimley pots. And if anybody'd a come out of ere a one of 'em, I'd have took stock of 'im. I never see nobody."

Mr. Grewbeer nodded shortly at intervals, as though to put on record his incredulity of each separate statement as it came. Presently he addressed the boy's father, offering him, as it were, the sound advice of age and experience, not to say of a family friend.

"You larn your young customer here, while he's young enough, for to speak truth and put the Devil's nose out of j'int."

"What lies has he been a parmin' off on you, neighbour? You come out, young Toadstools, and say 'em all over again, for me to know how much licking you want."

Young Toadstools flashes out. "I arn't been a telling of him any lies," says he. And his manner is that of maligned honour refuting slander. An episode of repetitions follows, in which he stands to his tale, while old Grewbeer remains doggedly incredulous, supporting himself by *a priori* reasoning. "That old party," he says, "*must* have come out somewheres, and there warn't anywheres else except he flew off out o' window, like a old blackbird." This omits an ill-chosen epithet, applied to the blackbird.

"You come out, young Toadstools," says the father, as before, "and stand in front of me with your 'ands behind your back. . . . Now look me in the heye!" The boy complies, promptly

enough. "Now then! Who come out o' that there front garden between when I went in and when I come out?"

"Nobody come out till you come out, or I'd 'a seen 'em."

"And no lies?"

"No—just like I tell you!"

The father turns to the old man, who seems to be on the point of repeating his doubts. "You give attention, neighbour, and hear me telling of you. My boy he says he saw no one, looking me fair and square in the heye. And I say he's spoke the truth. So any party as says he hasn't, calls me liar. Now what 'a you got to say to that?"

Mr. Grewbeer seemed disconcerted. "Well, master!"—he said at last—"in course after sich a good turn as you done me Thursday afternoon, I'm bound to believe your son, and I do so accordin'. I can't say fairer than that. And whatever you like to put a name to, I'll stand."

But Mr. Pritchett's quart, backed by his principles, stood in the way of his putting a name to anything. Possibly his disposition towards a loving cup with old Grewbeer was small; or he might have felt that the latter's views of the plasticity of belief—though at one with the religious world's—would not bear examination. Anyhow, he excused himself and went his way, leaving the old man in a perfectly genuine state of bewilderment. For his undertaking to "believe" what he had been convinced was false was made with a misgiving that perhaps that conviction was itself unsound.

CHAPTER IV

FRED lost no time in propounding The Scheme to his friend Mr. Snaith, who at first only saw lions in the path. In the end he admitted its fascinating character; saw that objections—obvious enough—to a common household might be met by dividing the house into two domiciles, without so much as a door between. Hostilities are impossible through a nine-inch partition wall. He conceded, with some reluctance, that it would be practicable to form a company to take over a square mile or so of the neighbourhood and erect thereon a few luxurious residences, to be held at a rent high enough to justify the allotment of four-fifths of it as parks and gardens. He saw no objection to the place having been in use as a madhouse. If you insisted on a sanehouse you condemned yourself to dwell always in a house that had not been previously occupied. Was Fred going to maintain that any house he himself had occupied for six months could rank as *sane*? At least in this house the patients had been under treatment, whereas in ordinary residences they were all at large. What was Fred engaged upon at that moment? Drawing details of an engine that was to work without vibration!

But there was one objection that seemed to him fatal—the distance from town. Distance was unchangeable. Nothing could make it shorter or longer. He was well aware that we have not a particle of evidence either that visible creation always remains the same size, or varies continually—multiplies itself by N for that matter—every three seconds or so. There was any amount of elbow-room in space, and for all he could see the Universe could go on at that game indefinitely. But a mile would always be so many yards, and if one yard-measure took to multiplying itself by N , every other yard-measure would do so likewise, and every healthy cube would remain as broad as it is long. The distance between human wickets would always be exactly so many circumferences of a cricket-ball. Similarly, it would always be the same journey from The Cedars to Wimbledon, from Wimbledon to Waterloo, and from Waterloo to Lincoln's Inn Fields. He could not put it at less than an hour and a quarter, try as he might.

But Fred had recent experience, to show against this estimate. He had made a trial trip to the house the day before, and had timed everything. "Nothing is more misleading than Time, Charley," said he. "I assure you, I walked from the house to Wimbledon in eighteen minutes quite easily, got to Waterloo in another fifteen, and was back here in time to dress for dinner by six-thirty. As it was a trial trip to see how long it took, it wouldn't have been fair to hurry. So I took it easy, and that's what it worked out at—forty-eight minutes all told! If I had taken a hansom at this end, it would have been thirty-eight. Simply nothing!"

"A bagatelle!" said the young man addressed, who was enjoying a small morning cigar in the rooms of his friend Fred Carteret, overhead. It was the third day after the Sunday lunch, and Fred had been taken the evening before to be presented to the Miss Hinchliffe to whom his friend Charley Snaith was affianced. The visit had been a great success, and everyone had found everyone else charming.

"Well, but it *is* a bagatelle," said Frederic rather impatiently, as though he doubted his friend's bona-fides. "What makes you think it isn't?"

"I didn't say it wasn't. I said it was."

"Yes, but you didn't mean it. You're a scoffer, Charles; that's what you are. I hate chaps that are not in earnest. . . . Yes, but really, old chap, thirty-eight minutes is an awfully short time—you know it is!"

"Doosid short time in itself. Good job it isn't thirty-five minutes shorter—for it!"

"It's no use trying to make you serious, so I shan't talk about it. . . ." He changed the topic. "I say—look here! Ought I to call your young woman Lucy?"

"Very rum circumstance! She wants to know whether she ought to call you Fred."

"What did you say?"

"Said she ought to. Said you expected it."

"She didn't begin. She 'Mr. Cartereted' me, all the evening."

"She couldn't begin, bang off!"

"Well—I can't begin 'Lucying' her, bang off!"

"It's a devil of a fix. You'll have to settle it between you, somehow!"

"But how am I to 'Lucy' her, till she 'Freds' me?"

"Very rum again! That's just what she said. How is she to begin 'Fredding' you till you've 'Lucied' her?"

Frederic seemed absorbed in thought, but not upon the machine he was drawing. Presently his thoughts took form, and he said:—"It's all very fine, Charley, but I do *not* see why you are to call Cinty *Miss* Cintra and I'm to call your girl Lucy."

"Because Elbows comes in."

"Nobody wants you to call her 'Elbows.'"

"Of course not. That's *in camera*. But if I 'Cinty' Miss Cintra it would sound rum to 'Miss Fraser' Elbows."

"Well—call her Nancy."

"My wig! Shouldn't I catch it hot! Why, she wouldn't call me 'Charley,' if the Devil was behind her with a bradawl."

"Anyhow, you've got to work it out somehow. Unless you 'Cinty' my Cinty, I can't 'Lucy' your Lucy. Twig?"

The young lawyer rubbed the nose that had been discussed and condemned at M^{rs}. Carteret's, and shook the head it adorned, to express perplexity; but seemed to see a way out of the difficulty. "My young gal," he said, "will have to begin 'Fredding' you, on her own hook, and that'll square it." He then smoked peacefully, while Fred became absorbed in his drawing.

An engineering problem was evidently vexing the draughtsman. He erased something petulantly, saying:—"No—that would never do!"

"What's the rumpus?" said Mr. Charley, unfeelingly.

"Only a beastly mechanical fact. You see, I've got the cylinder all right, with the pistons working in opposite directions, and I fancy the condenser's all right . . ."

"Well, what more do you want?"

"I want the two pistons to work exactly alike, only opposite ways, as if one was the other in a looking-glass."

"Why shouldn't they? Let 'em!"

"Why shouldn't they, indeed? Why—see what happens! One turns the main driving-pulley one way, t'other t'other. Then they stick."

"Well—then you stoke up, till they go."

"They don't go."

"Then what happens? *Something happens.*"

"You generate steam. Boiler bursts, if you don't take care. Shut up while I think." Mr. Snaith complies, and presently Fred resumes, as one who states a case clearly. "Three courses are open to me: one, a cross-strap, and I hate a cross-strap. Another, an idler. . . . Let's see now! How would an idler work? Suppose I employ an idler?"

"If he won't work, give him the cross-strap. That'll make him work, if anything will."

"Nothing will make you serious, Charley, so I shan't try. But I must say I *am* surprised that you do not see the enormous importance of the points at issue. Just consider—*no vibration!*"

"Well—nothin' would ever set one's teeth on edge. I see that."

"It's more than that, Charles. Just consider it this way now. I only put a hypothetical case. Suppose you could generate a thousand horse-power in a room with a thin partition, and not wake up anyone in the next room!"

"I shouldn't do it."

"But why not?"

"I should be afraid of getting in a row."

Fred despaired visibly of his friend's intelligence. "By hypothesis," said he, kindly but firmly, "there would be no vibration. Why, then, hesitate to generate a thousand horse-power . . . ?"

Mr. Charles interrupted him. "It would be upstairs," said he, irrelevantly. "I shouldn't want to. But of course some feller *might* go to sleep downstairs, on a sofa."

Fred made concession. "Suppose we make it downstairs, and a sofa. If I am right, a duplex engine of the construction I propose would develop *no vibration*, whatever the number of horse-power. Each motor would be the exact counterpart of the other, only t'other way round. . . ." He went on for some time with this sort of thing, as he was in the habit of doing with one remarkable invention after another, but received no attention from his legal friend, who appeared to regard his case as one of harmless monomania. No doubt if Fred had ever concentrated, the world would have been the richer by one or other of his brilliant discoveries.

The disquisition on the New Duplex Non-Vibrator had to stop when Mr. Snaith threw the end of his cigar in the fire and said now he must be off. There was, however, still an unsettled point to pause over before he took his departure. "We haven't settled," said he, "what day we are to go to The Cedars."

"Why, no—we haven't. You see, I'm all in favour of getting the whole scheme in black and white before taking it to my uncle. I can't act without him; because, you see, he's my guardian and trustee and all that sort of thing—has control of the purse-strings, don't you know! We haven't heard from him,

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but we know he went to see over the house—last Saturday week.”

“Hasn’t he written to say what he thought of it?”

“No—he hasn’t. But there’s nothing strange about that. He’s—he’s— Well!—he’s Uncle Drury. That’s all one can say. My mother agrees with me that it’s better to leave him alone and have patience. You’ll see he’ll write in a day or two.”

“And squash the scheme?”

“Probably. He’ll say the house is too big. Of course it is too big—for us alone. But then of course we must write and say how true that is, and how we feel we must defer to his better judgment, and give up the idea. With tears, of course!”

“I see the dodge. And then . . .”

“And then of course we spring the joint-stock scheme upon him.”

“What an artful card you are, Frederic! . . . I say—I must be off. There’s a chap coming to the office to see me at eleven-thirty. Ta ta!”

Cintra had come to stay with Mrs. Carteret for a few days, so Fred passed his evenings at his mother’s, or took the two ladies out into Society, or to see or hear a performer. The little dachshund was under the impression that Miss Fraser had come to stay with him, and seemed sometimes doubtful whether he ought to sanction the visit; smelling the young lady suspiciously, and sometimes barking suddenly, as if he had seen through some conspiracy, and wasn’t going to stand it. He accepted flattery as his due, although now and then bystanders would remonstrate with the extravagant forms it took in the mouths of his female admirers. One of these ascribed to him omniscience, combined with a rare modesty, hesitating to seek publicity for sound opinions based upon it.

“Did he think his Uncle Drury would write in a day or two, and say the house was a bargain and could always be disposed of, so that it would always be a sound investment? And had he no patience with his papa for fidgeting?” Cintra spoke, the same evening, after a light early dinner, which would allow the three of them to get to the Princess’s in time for the chief piece, although of course it was a pity not to see the little Japanese thing that came first.

“I’m not fidgeting,” said Fred. “Only you know it *will* be exasperating if some idiotic Institution cuts in and gets the place

under our very eyes. And all because of Uncle Drury and his love of power. That's what it is—his love of power."

"Fred!" This is remonstrance, or arrest of misjudgment, from the young man's mother.

"What, Mother! . . . Oh—I know! Uncle Lru has all the Christian virtues, and a few thrown in. But nobody can say he isn't fond of power."

"I am not going to say so. I am not going to say anything. Isn't it time for her to go for the cab? Look at your watch. The clock's slow. . . . Yes—we haven't too much time." She is leaving the room for finishing touches, in Cintra's wake, as that young lady has vanished upstairs, when she repents of her Spartan resolve to abstain from speech, and turns at the door to say:—"You know you would be very sorry to hear that your uncle was ill."

"But he isn't ill."

"Not that I know of. But suppose he were—and you know it is a little odd, his not writing—you know you would be sorry you had said that about him. Because you *are* good-hearted underneath, although you talk great nonsense sometimes. Now I must go, child, or the cab will be here."

The son is beginning:—"But you don't think . . .," somewhat uneasily, when the sound of a four-wheeler arriving at the front gate hastens his mother's departure. She responds, however, to a misgiving or alarm in his voice by an ill-considered tone of reassurance, probably the surest means of creating the anxiety it is intended to allay. Oh dear no!—she has not the slightest reason for supposing his uncle to be in other than perfect health. Has he ever been otherwise? Is not his robustness a sort of fundamental principle of Nature? Don't be a ridiculous boy and fuss!

Cintra appears, resplendent from the finishing touches, and is critical about his handling of her overmantle. Will he never learn to make himself of use? He is enslaved, but puts none of his slavery down to the finishing touches. Was ever lover shrewd enough to draw the natural inferences when Love's lamp burns the brighter for a superadded gewgaw, or dwindles at sight of a misfit? Those finishing touches make the youth very loverlike; and as there is no fear of Lipscombe, who is helping her mistress towards completion upstairs, the pair have the stage to themselves and take advantage of it until Mrs. Carteret appears, temperately dazzling—but dazzling! Then they hurry into the cab and are off. The little cachshund has to be dis-

abused of an idea that his family have been pressing to take him to the play, and cannot help thinking there is some mistake.

Fred did not accompany his mother and *fiancée* back to Maida Vale, but went to his chambers. There was no reason why he should not live at home, and go to town every day, except that chambers convince their occupant of his importance, and make him feel professional. It had seemed conceivable that concentration might ensue, as their result. But this expectation had been doomed to disappointment from the beginning, and Fred became more diffuse than ever. His chambers became as it were the vortex of a whirlpool of inattention to objectives, and purposes gone astray, with a helpless victim in the centre under the delusion that he was stability itself, and needed only to stretch out his hand to recover any one of them.

The victim, as he walked from the Princess's after packing off the two ladies in a hansom, pictured himself to himself as the most fortunate of Consulting Engineers, in spite of the fact that nobody to speak of had consulted him up to date; the most ingenious inventor, in spite of the fact that no one of his thousand schemes had taken concrete form; and incidentally, by way of a side-compliment to Cintra, as one of the happiest of men. It wouldn't do to leave her out. How much more fortunate he had been in his choice than Charley, whose love had the misfortune to be a dark beauty. He admitted the beauty, but took exception to her complexion. He and Charley had been quite unanimous in praise of *blondes*, up to date.

The streets were settling down to silence and would soon enjoy it, disturbed only by stray gusts of valediction from host to friend departing into the night, or the heartfelt cries of the latter to the first hansom seen on the horizon, which might be the last. The bells of St. Clement Danes may have said oranges and lemons earlier in the day, but their meaning on the last stroke of twelve was plainly—"Go to bed!" Fancy may have imagined in their tone a satisfaction that till two o'clock they had only to strike one, but the prosaic mind—Fred's in this case—only looked at its watch and found it slow. He was thinking of the Duplex Non-Vibrating Engine, and how he could just insert a trifling modification he had thought of and yet get to bed by one.

He had not yet arrived at that happy stage in the life of a letter-recipient when nothing surprises, because of the risk of throwing good surprise away on what might prove an advertisement. There are some among us so hardened by the constant

plethora of our letter-boxes that a glance at the direction is all a letter gets, even though it is visibly a warning from a secret band of assassins, with a skull and crossbones, and Beware!—written large on the cover in a big round hand, the handwriting of a professional homicide. But Fred was still such a novice that he felt quite curious to know what the messenger-boy had come for, of whom the gatekeeper reported as an enquirer for Mr. Frederic Carteret's chambers, not long before the arrival of their occupant. "I shouldn't wonder if you came across him," said the gatekeeper, "considering that I saw him come in, and never saw him go out. He hasn't flew away over the roofs, I'll pound it." He had not, and Fred found him on the lowest step of the stair that led up to his chambers on the third floor and Mr. Snaith's on the second.

"You've got something for me—letter or parcel?" said he.

The boy seemed to be a boy of strong character. "Easy does it," said he. "'Urry don't. I've got a letter for Frederic Carteret, Esquire. P'raps you ain't him. Who's to know?"

As chances to more folk than not, Fred, though well on in his twenties, never happened to have been called on for proof of his identity. He felt for the first time how helpless the position would make him, if he were thrown fairly on his own resources, like the little woman who was so maltreated by a pedlar named Stout. However, as he knew he could refer to the gatekeeper—besides, was there not Snaith?—he felt it safe to treat the question as an open one.

"Perhaps I'm not him," said he. "I have nothing but my own personal convictions to go upon, and it's a subject in which one isn't free from prejudice. What's to be done? Suppose we refer to the official who let you through? Official testimony is always trustworthy."

The boy rejected it, for all that. "I'd as soon trust your word as his," said he. "Why—he hasn't got a sound tooth in his head!" This showed that he was an observant boy, although he was evidently ill-read on the Foundations of Belief. He went on to propose a condition. "Look here, Governor," said he. "If your latchkey fits the 'ole and lets you in, I'll 'and you this 'ere letter and take my chance. We've no call to bust our bilers over it." His governor replied:—"Suppose we don't! Come along!" and led the way upstairs. The Yale lock acknowledged his touch, as an intimate friend's, and the boy having conceded the letter departed, whistling louder than the circumstances appeared to warrant.

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Fred watched the exit of the whistler, not altogether sure he ought not to shout a remonstrance after him, and then returned to examine the letter, which had puzzled him, as he saw on it the image and superscription of Shortage's Private Hotel, the *pied-à-terre* of his Uncle Drury when in town. He knew that his uncle had left London for Vexton Stultifer nearly a fortnight since, and why he should have come back again without communicating his movements to Maida Vale was more than his nephew could imagine. But then the letter was not directed by his uncle.

While he is opening the letter, and pooh-poohing a misgiving that something has gone wrong, let the story note the reverend gentleman's arrangement with Shortage's Hotel, which was special and peculiar, based upon the fact that his patronage was a valuable asset to Shortage, who had said of him:—"The reverend and learned Doctor's weight and respectability would neutralise a 'undred 'ooligans in any establishment, apart from the Management's wish to be accommodatin' without fear or favour." Therefore Dr. Carteret's terms were kep' down to what you might call zero, and a bedroom practically reserved for him which took his fancy, in view of the spacious houtlook, because you see right acrost the Square. In his bedroom was a cupboard, believed by other guests of the hotel to contain its skeleton, but really only a deposit for duplicates of Mr. Carteret's wardrobe, to free him from the necessity of carrying luggage every time he came to town. It was this liberty which left it open to him to walk from The Cedars to Wimbledon station, that day when he went to inspect the Old Madhouse.

Now, Fred had every reason for expecting a letter from his uncle, so his handwriting on Shortage's note-paper would only have been surprising in so far as it would have been evidence of the writer's return to London unexpectedly. The oddity of the thing lay in the fact that someone else had written to Fred from his uncle's peculiar hotel, where no one else who wrote letters to him—so he thought—ever would or did go. He cancelled before its birth an idea involving the forwarding of a letter to him by Shortage. No such contingency could arise.

Why is it that when one receives a letter which one knows all about beforehand, one tears it open promptly, and reads it all through to confirm one's certainty of its contents? Why, on the other hand, when we have no idea of them, do we contemplate the envelope doubtfully and say what on earth can this be about?—when the obvious course is to read it and see?

This may be an exceptional experience of the writer's. Anyhow, it was Fred's course with this letter. He hung fire about opening it, so completely at a loss was he as to its possible contents. Yet he did not at that moment anticipate any evil. He was face to face with the inexplicable—that was all!

When he ultimately opened it he found two letters;—one to his uncle, unopened, directed in a woman's hand; the other to himself, from Shortage. The latter had thought it best, for various reasons, to depart from his instructions about letters received for Dr. Carteret during his absence, which were to keep all letters at the hotel, pending instructions to send them on. Mr. Frederic Carteret would note that the envelope was stamped at Vexton Stultifer with yesterday morning's date, and also on the envelope with the name of the school.

"Well—what of that?" said Mr. Frederic Carteret aloud to empty space. "What's Shortage in a pucker about?" He was not the least alive to anything unusual.

Presently it dawned upon him, uncomfortably. It certainly was singular that a correspondent should write to his uncle, in London, from the school itself. It looked as if the headmaster was not there. But he *was* there—Fred knew that. . . . Stop a moment though! How did he know?

Well—he didn't know, exactly. But it was as good as knowledge. Had not his uncle driven away from his mother's house ten days or a fortnight since, certainly meaning to go and inspect The Cedars; that was to be relied upon, surely! Did he go there though, or did he change his mind and go somewhere else? Very odd, but not absolutely impossible! It would account, too, for no letter having come about the house. Yes—that had something to do with it. But wherever he went, that would throw no light upon his absence from the school just at the beginning of the term, with the boys returning from their Easter holiday. It was such an incredible shortcoming in the most rigid of headmasters. What would the boys in Fred's time have thought of such an irregularity? The end of the world!

Pondering over an anxiety alone in the silence of the night does not relieve it. It grows and grows. The various possibilities of accounting for that inexplicable letter, lying unopened on the table, grew less and less tangible with every new effort. It was a letter—so ran surmise—posted long ago, overlooked by the functionaries at Vexton Stultifer, and sent at last with an overdue stamp. What nonsense! Well then!—it had been

misdated by accident, a slip of the stamp, and detained at the office to gloss over the blunder, sent on, that is, as soon as its date warranted it. An idiotic idea! It was an escapade of the boys—some irreverence to the headmaster they thought to escape suspicion of by sending it to be re-forwarded. Rubbish outright! As if any boys would not know what postmarks meant. Better to acknowledge the insolubility of the problem at once than make it the subject of such abortive solutions!

It would ratify a renunciation of further speculation to put on a working jacket and turn up the cuffs. Fred did so, and felt satisfied. He could make that slight modification of the Non-Vibrator and get to bed, and place the riddle before his friend Charley's legal mind at breakfast. These young men had contracted a habit of breakfasting at each other's rooms alternately. It was Mr. Snaith's turn to come to him to-morrow, and he could possess his soul in peace till then, subject to the duplex action of that engine, which its inventor could almost feel not vibrating, as he thought of the enormous horse-power it was going to develop.

Not but that, if that was the sound of a legal mind coming up the stone stair-flight by fits and starts, he might just as well hear its opinion before going to bed. The stillness of the night made all things audible, even a footstep through a street door. Fred went out and called over the hand-rail, as soon as he was certain it wasn't Upstairs, who was just as likely to be coming in late as the First Floor:—"Is that you, Charley?" Which was an absurd question, as its form implied that the answer was known.

"Suppose it is, why shouldn't it be? You're up late, young feller. . . . All right—I'll come up."

"Something I want you to look at. . . . No—certainly nothing wrong. Only something I can't make out. Clek!" This is the only known way of spelling an exhortation freely used to horses.

"Coming—coming—coming!" says that horse, with as much of remonstrative impatience as a real quadruped would often express, granting speech. "Why this unseemly haste? I say, Fred, I've got a message for you, from a lady."

"I want you to look at this letter I can't make out. Who's the lady? What's the message?"

"Give us the letter." The conversation intersects, as much talk does. Fred, less interested in the message than in the letter, drops the former, and hands the latter to his friend, with

its companion, for explanation. "That's from the hotel-keeper where my uncle puts up," says he.

Mr. Snaith took the open letter, and read it with the responsible air of one who legally advises legion. He was cultivating a professional tone, and this letter brought with it an opportunity.

"Now the other," said he, after two readings.

"It's not opened," said Fred. "But you can see the outside."

"I suppose that means I'm not to open it. Why not?"

"Well—it's a letter to somebody else."

"Then forward it. Where is he?"

"My uncle? At the school—*must* be!"

"And where did the letter come from?"

"The school! That's the fix!"

"That is the fix." Mr. Snaith is turning the unopened letter up and down, over and under. Presently he sees his way to something. "Got any methylated?" he asks.

"I thought you would be at that game," says Fred. But he produces a phial bottle, with a very little spirit at the bottom. There is only just enough to moisten the direction side of the envelope, and the transparency is only temporary. But both have read something before it evaporates.

"What did you see?" says Fred.

"'Scarlet fever.'"

"So did I."

"What else?"

"'Ought to go home?'"

"So did I. But what came before—before 'ought'?"

"'Boy'—or 'boys.'"

"Ah—but which?" The point cannot be settled, and all the methylated is gone.

The young men look blankly at one another, and the message from a lady is quite forgotten.

It was horribly clear that scarlet fever had broken out in the school, and that the patient or "the boys" would have to be packed off home. And this was apparently written to the head-master under the impression that it would find him at a London hotel where he had certainly not been for a fortnight.

"Where the dickens is the old buffer?" said Mr. Snaith, disrespectfully. He was yawning, too. But this was a source of comfort to Fred, who was becoming painfully alive to the inexplicable character of the case; for it was clear that Charley

had no misgivings about the safety of the reverend Doctor. He never would have called him an old buffer, otherwise.

Fred affected indifference, and overdid it. "Oh—the old boy's all right, or we should have heard." He put side on; but, for all he was so confident, he considered details necessary. "I expect it's his father's old friend, Lord Ownership, who's dying. Nothing more likely than that he should have Uncle Drury sent for. And suppose he didn't die, but hung on. . . .

Well—what could my uncle do? He couldn't say he was forced to be at the school, because he isn't. He's got a regiment of under-masters and a live matron, who he says can manage the school better than himself. The letter's from her. Must be!"

Then Mr. Snaith undid the good effect of his expression "old buffer," and seemed to doubt the validity of Lord Ownership. "Isn't a fortnight rather a large order?" said he.

"Not if you take it in driblets. 'One day more won't matter'—don't you know?—that sort of thing! It soon mounts up." And no doubt Fred thought this contributed to explain the position. He had his reservation, however. "I must say it was rather strange, though, that he never wrote to Mrs. What's-her-name at the school, to say where he was."

"He may have done so. How do we know?"

"My dear Charley, where is your legal acumen? If Mrs. Orpen—the name's Orpen—knew where he was, why on earth should she write to him at his London hotel?"

Mr. Snaith saw the force of this for a second, then perceived a means towards reinstating his professional reputation. "Why, of course she would, if he wrote to tell her to do so. That squares it all up. He meant to come back to London, and wrote to her to let him have news by the way. He was delayed a day. You go to the hotel to-morrow, and you'll find him there. The whole thing is nothing but the blunder of the hotel-keeper, who's an officious ass. You do as I say. Go to-morrow and take him his letter back. . . . I say, Fred, it's to-morrow already—has been, for two hours and more."

Fred was immensely relieved by this new theory, and went so far as to wonder why he had not thought of that before. Yes—that was the best thing to do. He would go straight to the hotel, and no doubt would find the old gentleman there. Of course there may have been a hundred reasons, of which we knew nothing, for his return to London. Besides, he was a peculiar old cock.

Fred would have had to sleep soundly on the strength of this

fact—for nothing need surprise us in the ways of peculiar old cocks—if he had not had the additional assistance of his friend's last theory, which really was very plausible. It provided a forecast of a programme for next day, which included an image of the Rev. Drury, denouncing in terms scarcely clerical the presumption and impertinence of Mr. Shortage and his kind, not without—so Fred hoped—some recognition of his own discretion and promptitude in returning the letter without delay. In fact, Fred fell asleep while this image was saying, with knitted brows:—"Very proper! Yes, nephew, you acted quite rightly to bring it back at once. No serious mischief is done now; but it might have been—might have been!" At which point Fred dropped asleep and the image became merged in that of a scarlet fever patient, who worked both ways and consequently developed no vibration.

But he was not destined to see the image in the flesh, or any version of its original, confirmatory of its accuracy or otherwise.

CHAPTER V

MR. SNAITH used to shave, for in his day beards were no longer in a majority, and he considered that a smooth chin would inspire confidence in clients. So he was getting round a careful corner when Fred came in to breakfast next—or later on the same—morning.

"Don't agitate a feller," said he in reply to a question. He negotiated the last bar of his shave, and came out of his bedroom using two hairbrushes with no handles. "What's that about a lady?"

"*The* lady. The one that sent me a message. You never gave it. Who's the lady?"

"Why—Miss Hinchliffe, of course! I put your point to her about how I was to address your young woman, and she was down upon my view—said I was making difficulties. But she declined to give a final opinion without seeing the parties. Especially Elbows. So she says when is she to have the pleasure? That's the message."

Fred reflected on the remaining days of the current week, by name, giving each one time for consideration. "Thursday—Friday—Saturday!" said he. "No—I'm fixed for every afternoon. But couldn't we make it Sunday lunch at my mother's? I could give up going to Upper Norwood, and the girls could bike over to Maida Vale instead. They would just as soon."

"That'll do, prime! Only I say—look here! Elbows is of the essence of the contract. She's got to come."

"All right! I can let you know to-morrow. Anything in the paper?" No—there was nothing in the paper; only the usual political rot. This was Fred's report, after a very short glance at the vital columns of the *Times*. Further, there was no occasion to hurry breakfast on his account, as his uncle would not be visible if he went too early.

When he went to the hotel, the reason that he did not see his uncle was that his uncle was not there, not that he was technically invisible. This was not reassuring, but Fred affected to make light of it. He told Mr. Shortage that although he had had no letter from Mr. Carteret, he was quite satisfied as to the causes of his non-appearance at the school, and repeated the con-

lecture about the dying nobleman. Mr. Shortage, impressed by the peerage, perceived in this incident a means of accounting for almost any departure from custom. Still, he was a little inclined to justify his own unusual procedure, in sending on that letter the night before. "It is now twenty years," said he, "since Dr. Carteret first made this hotel his 'Ome when visiting the metropolis—for I can find no name more sootable than a 'Ome—and never have I made bold before now to depart from his instructions, namely, to keep all correspondence till wrote for. This doo to his uncertainty in coming and going, mainly the result of parents and guardians. And I venture to think, Sir, that if you take in consideration all the circumstances . . ."

"I'm not finding any fault, Mr. Shortage," said Fred. "In fact, I don't see what else you could have done. It was such a queer turn-out." He was rather impatient of the hotel-keeper's loquacity, which he knew of old, and wanted to abbreviate.

But Mr. Shortage did not want to be abbreviated. "Queer indeed, Sir," said he. "But I have my doubts—asking your pardon for interruptin' you—if you realise how queer. Excuse me if I take the liberty of appearing prolix. But . . ."

"Something you haven't mentioned?" said Fred, and settled down to listen.

"Only this, Sir. The reverend gentleman left this house by the very same door you come in at just now, on Saturday week. His last words to me was:—'I shall lunch at Maida Vale'—at your respected mother's, Mr. Carteret—and shall go back direct.' Those were his words, and not 'earin' anything to the contry, was I wrong to take for granted he arrived at his destination?"

"Well—probably he did. Who says he didn't?"

Mr. Shortage's rhetorical manner became more impressive, as he leaned forward to say in a deepened voice, behind an upraised finger:—"Judge of my surprise, Mr. Carteret, when three days since Mrs. Orpen, the writer of this unopened letter, as I think, calls at this hote, enquirin' for the reverend gentleman. And what gives me a kind of turn"—at which point the speaker left rhetoric, and became more natural—"she says the headmaster has never been back, and this was ten days after he had wrote to say have a chop ready at seven forty-five. He never came and he's never come, and he's not there now, except he's got back since Mrs. Hoe's letter was posted." He spoke of Mrs. Orpen by her initial, and over-did it.

Mr. Snaith's Lord Ownership theory had not necessarily in-

volved Dr. Drury's non-return to the school. It only sought for what would cover the matron's letter, and account for his not being at the hotel when it was delivered. It was not unreasonable to suppose that he had gone to see a dying friend some days after arriving at Vexton, and written to the matron that he was returning to London, where a letter would reach him as usual at his hotel. But to vanish for a fortnight and communicate with no one! Fred's alarm of last night came back, when Mr. Shortage produced this incontestible evidence that his uncle had never been at Vexton.

Naturally he relieved his feelings by finding fault. "Do you mean to say," said he, "that that fool of a woman actually knew Dr. Drury had started for the school and had never arrived, and yet never came to tell us?"

"I made that suggestion, Sir, to Mrs. Hoe, and she did not see her way to acting upon it, not wishing to give unnecessary alarm. Likewise, she said she could 'ardly claim acquaintance."

"What the devil did that matter?"

"Nothing, if a certainty." Mr. Shortage seemed rather at a loss to explain his view of the matron's position, but decided on:—"But if convinced that, when a 'eadmaster, accidents do *not* happen, the contry is the case. Likewise, as she said, if the Doctor had come back 'ome in her absence, she shouldn't know which way to look."

"Of course he might. And he may have done so now, for that matter, since she wrote that letter."

"He *may* have," said the hotel-keeper. But there was something in his manner that Fred found not reassuring. He thought it wisest to set this down to a nervous temperament in Mr. Shortage. He was still well able to pooh-pooh the idea that anything was amiss.

"Well!" said he. "I quite expected to find him here. I suppose he changed his mind and went straight back. But perhaps he didn't. If so, he'll be here in the course of the day. Send me a wire to my chambers when he comes."

He did not go back to the Temple, but after walking about musing over a question he asked himself and could not answer, he turned into the telegraph office in Fleet Street, and wrote a telegram to Mrs. Orpen at the school. The question had been:—"If a member of your family were to disappear, and could not be accounted for, how long a time should you allow to pass before making enquiries? He shrank from phrasing it mentally:—"Before going to the police." The telegram was

simply:—"Is Dr. Carteret at the school? Reply to 17 Maida Vale, Carteret."

The answer to the telegram might arrive at his mother's before he did, unless he looked alive. He did so, to the extent of climbing up on the front seat of what proved to be a Bayswater bus, not going the whole way. He felt that he wanted to talk about unexplained disappearances, but did not see his way to introducing the subject to the driver; and he could not turn round and speak of it to a man on the seat behind him with a basket of fish, whose identity, concealed from the eye by newspapers, betrayed itself by its smell. This man and the driver lived in a world of their own, from which they rather pointedly excluded passengers on the front seat. The conversation was one long enigma, which Fred tried to solve in vain.

"Anythin' doin' your way?" said the driver.

"'Orkins is orf," said the fish unit. "'Arrison's made his lucky, and they talk of makin' it fourteen 'underweight instead of diwision. Others is in favour of the system, all round, and leaving off on Thursdays. I don't put my money on neither."

"What's become of old Isaacson?" said the driver.

"He's a bit off his chump, they do say. Bein' took proper care on, in the manner o' speakin', in one of these 'ere hear-sylums. Ah—there was a man now! He'd never have stood any of this here finickin' round, not he. He'd have had some of 'em to rights long afore this, I lay."

"Trust him!" said the driver. "Why, I've known that man 'old his tongue by the hour together. And when he said five pound, he meant five pound. . . ." And so the conversation proceeded, without its hearer being able to attach any meaning whatever to it, until he disembarked at the Marble Arch.

The mystery of Hawkins, Harrison, and old Isaacson, was so inscrutable that it kept possession of his mind, as an insoluble enigma, almost to the point of his arrival, on a second bus, at the gate of 17 Maida Vale. What a relief it would be to him if a yellow paper had come for him to say, for instance:—"Arrived last night all well am writing Carteret." For his imagination supplied the exact wording of a welcome telegram.

At any rate, unless he found the telegram there already on his arrival he would say nothing to his mother. He very often dropped in to lunch. No explanation of that was necessary. And why need she know anything about his alarm—probably a groundless one—if his uncle's absence was accounted for? Behind his scare lay the knowledge that his mother would be much

more concerned than himself if "anything" had happened to the old boy. Not that he was without affection for him, but that his affection had in it an element that played towards it the part that discretion plays to valour.

His pause at the front gate after ringing, with the little dachshund within dabbling at it and addressing him through it, leaves time for a word or two on the relation of Mrs. Carteret to her brother-in-law.

The manner of it had been thus. Forty years ago, she had been one of the prettiest twelve-year-olds that ever a fifteen-year-old fell in love with, boy-wise, over the wall that parted his parents' garden from hers. The respective owners of the gardens laughed, and said:—"Let them!" It would all die out and be forgotten in due course, like a thousand other flames warranted to burn for ever. What did it matter to what degree of distraction young Fred Carteret and Emilia Stacey loved each other? Each of them would probably live to love some other—some half-dozen others—to distraction, before finding out that married bliss has its seamy side which seldom sees the light. At least, leave the flowers in Hope's garden to live their natural life and die!

But the buds of Fred's and Emilia's flowers were not destined to be nipped. They were to bloom and blossom and end as fruits; sweet or sour as might be, but still the consummation of the tree's growth. Seven years found the lovers of the same mind, in spite of the occasional stirring of little tiff-ripples on the sea of their contentment. By the time their joint ages had passed forty years, matrimony had ceased to be an air-castle—had in fact for the past two years been admitted to come within practical politics. Marriage followed at the ideal ages of twenty-two and nineteen. There was not a cloud on the horizon.

Not a visible one, at any rate. But invisible because no one looked towards its quarter of the heavens. All took for granted that Fred's grave elder brother had no reserve in his rejoicing at the wedding festivity. And it must be admitted that whatever that young parson concealed, he made the concealment effectual. No one dreamed that years had passed since a discipline had become a part of his life, enjoining one supreme duty—he must not love Emilia; that day by day, his earliest word at sight of her, his latest at parting from her, was that injunction to his soul—his soul that resented its necessity—"You must not love her!" He locked his secret in his heart, with a dead weight in it that made his utterance of the wedding-

service—for he had to marry them—a penance never to be forgotten.

No one who had to do with the Rev. Drury Carteret in after years ever imagined that he had a story—a love story—in the background of his life. And the worst sort of love story—a record of love-hunger whose satisfaction was by hypothesis impossible; of which the mere disclosure, even to the soul that had to bear it, was a thing to recoil from and resent. Folk generally thought the headmaster of Vexton a hard man—almost harsh—and certainly a stranger to any passion that deserved the name of tender. But he was only what a constant tension on his life had made him, and one of the most painful features of it was that he was forced—as it were in self-defence—to show this disciplinarian or repellent side of his character to his still beautiful sister-in-law. Even now, the slightest yielding to his repressed impulse seemed to him a step over a precipice. Five-and-twenty years of this position had made him what the story saw him, that day a fortnight since, when he went over to inspect the Old Madhouse.

Remember that we live in a world full of commonplace people, negative people; flat, stupid, uninteresting people, every one of whom has, behind a personality which does not appeal to us—important *us*—a story of some sort, and often one worth the telling. And remember that what we have seen of them, and have called by their names, has not been really *them*, but only evidence of their existence. To which we have paid no attention.

However, that's Philosophy, so called. It is not worth keeping Fred Carteret any longer standing at that gate, to indulge in Philosophy. To say nothing of that little dachshund's impatience, which is threatening to rend his soul by the time Lipscombe comes to open it.

His impatience does not seem well-grounded when the gate is opened, for his object in rushing out seems to be to inspect and deal with the two corners of the gate-piers. After which he gets upstairs as quick as may be, with his toes turned too much out, and presumably informs his mamma that her human son is following him. Or, she may have recognised the voice below, telling Lipscombe that cold mutton is all the speaker wants. Probably the latter, as otherwise her remark as she greets her son lacks meaning:—"There is sure to be fish enough." An afterthought causes misgiving:—"Unless Cit's coming." For the two young people are quite inconsiderate enough to come

plunging in without notice. This was Nancy's expression, applied to a case in point.

"Oh no—she's not coming. At least, I haven't asked her." Fred adds, and believes, that "anything will do" for him. Other young men may have thought the same, *cæteris paribus*.

"Is anything the matter?" His mother asks this suddenly, as though she had heard something in the tone of his voice—something amiss.

Oh dear no! Nothing was the matter. Nothing was ever further from being the matter. The freedom from cloud of the heavens, at all points of the compass, was in fact phenomenal. Of course, Fred overdid it. His mother only looked at him attentively for a moment, then decided in her mind that he and Cit had been tiffing! Never mind! He would confess directly, and then the tiff would blow over. That was what tiffs did, of this sort.

However, nothing transpired. On the contrary, when, after some delay owing to a slight intensification of lunch to cover the incoming of a second constituent, they found themselves at a board enriched with unexpected soup, what seemed to be exercising Fred's mind was that knotty point about what he should call Miss Hinchliffe. He sketched the position for his mother's benefit, and she appeared to weigh the questions involved with all due gravity. She remarked that, in her youth, Christian-naming was much more common than nowadays. This delusion is so strong at all times of the world that it may be safely referred to the same cause in all cases—the fact that youth is the age of Christian names. What is the value of infancy's impression about what grown-ups are calling each other? Mrs. Carteret was not sure that had not something to do with it. "However," she said, "I quite see your friend Mr. Snaith's point of view. Of course he cannot call Cit 'Cintra' and her sister Miss Fraser. It would make a formality. And, on the other hand, he could only address her as Nancy by express invitation. It might have been different with another name; Eliza for instance, or Gertrude. But there is something flip-pety-skippety about 'Nancy.' I suppose it's because 'saucy' ends in *cy*."

"Shouldn't wonder! But I see the fix in this light. If Charley Snaith were my brother . . ."

"But he isn't your brother."

"No—I know. But suppose he were!"

"Well—what then?"

"He'd be in for Christian-naming all round."

"I don't see that. He would call your wife Sarah or Martha or Penthesilea—anything her name happened to be—and she would call him Charles. Because of consanguinity. But he wouldn't call her sister anything but Miss Smith—or Jones or Montmorency—whichever it was." Fred looked doubtful, and Mrs. Carteret continued. "Yes—I'm perfectly right. Mr. Snaith is not your brother, so Cintra is not going to be his sister. Of course he can Christian-name her by special arrangement. Only, he *must* call Nancy Miss Fraser, unless she consents to be 'Nanced' by him." Fred still looked doubtful. "Why, my dear silly boy, don't you see it's exactly the same with his Miss Hinchman—Hinchliffe—what's her name . . . ?"

"Lucy. Lucy Hinchliffe."

"If Miss Lucy Hinchliffe had a sister, and Mr. Snaith were your brother, you would call her Lucy as a matter of course. But you would have to 'Miss' her sister, all the same,—unless she was married. . . ."

"I don't see why."

"Stupid Fred! Can't you see that you could marry *her*, while if Mr. Snaith departed this life ever so, you couldn't marry his widow—not if he were your brother."

"I s-see. It's a matter of consanguinity." Fred apprehended slowly. "It's the same thing as . . ." Something stopped him, and not only did his mother know what it was, but he himself knew she knew it a moment later, and felt he would have liked to have his last words back. But, after all, *did* it matter? For, consider, how senior his mother and his old uncle were! How could the subject be what his mind classed as a ticklish one, in the face of such seniority?

He could quite understand that delicate considerations were involved in the important question of whether he could address Miss Hinchliffe as Lucy; because how could the position be other than delicate, looking at all the points involved? Looking especially at the young lady's eyes and lips, which Fred found he recollected. In the early twenties one cultivates susceptibilities to which a previous generation may always have been strangers, and certainly must have become insensible to by now. Or, if one grants a certain latitude of humanity to one's ancestors generally, one must needs draw a line at mothers and uncles, still living. Nevertheless, Fred elided the rest of his speech, and turned it into a remonstrance with the little dachshund, whose whole

attitude was a reminder that this was his lunch; as well as, if not more than, that of his betters.

It is the business of a story to look into the minds of its characters, and this one may hold noteworthy a fact in that of Mrs. Carteret. She had never asked her son if he had yet heard from his uncle, which may have been either that she was satisfied that nothing was wrong in that quarter or that she had misgivings that something was, and shrank from suggesting alarms. But the thing this effect of consanguinity was "the same thing as," brought him into court—the court of her consciousness—and warranted an enquiry about his odd silence. She brushed aside as contemptible and ridiculous—with her own son—a momentary reluctance to risk showing that he had been so brought into court, and made no more ado, but asked her question. Had Fred had no letter from his uncle? She even began it with "By the by," almost acknowledging what had made her think of him.

"Well—the fact is . . ." Fred began, and hung fire over it. He ought to have said merely:—"No—have you?"

"Is anything the matter?"

"Oh dear no! What made you think so?"

"Only you looked so . . ."

"So what? I didn't look anything. . . . Well—I'll tell you. The fact is, I came here to-day to see if *you* had . . . had heard from him, I mean."

"I have heard nothing . . . Fred dear!—don't look so uncomfortable." Mrs. Carteret paused an instant, then said earnestly and quickly:—"Do tell me if anything's the matter."

"Well—no—nothing's the matter. . . . However! . . . Well, I suppose I may as well tell you. I can't exactly make out where Uncle Dru is." Under the circumstances, it was not an easy thing to say in an unconcerned way. Fred failed signally.

"Why not at the school, as usual?"

"Would the matron be writing to him at Shortage's, if he were?"

"Why—no! But has she written? What has she written? How do you know?" Fred told how he knew—told the whole story. He ended with his sending of the telegram to Mrs. Orpen, and how he was momentarily expecting its arrival. He did not intend to be the least astonished if his uncle was not at the school, and of course that would account for a letter coming for him in London. Neither would he feel the slightest surprise,

if enquiry showed that the old boy had not reappeared at Shortage's. His attitude was, that nothing should be regarded as improbable except that "anything had happened."

As his mother seemed still uneasy and dissatisfied, he produced his friend's theory, which had had such a soothing effect the night before. "I fancy Charley may be right," said he. "Ten to one Lord Ownership's people have sent for Uncle Dru. You know how thick they were, and now the old man's dying, nothing is more likely than that he should send for him. Old college chums, don't you see? It would have to be something serious to make him chuck the school, just at the beginning of the midsummer term. I expect it will turn out to be that."

"Is Lord Ownership dying?"

"I don't know. The newspapers said he was."

"Are you sure it didn't say he was going to be married?"

"Quite sure. Dying. He's been ill ever so long."

Now, the fact was that Master Fred knew nothing whatever about his lordship, except that he and Uncle Drury had been at Balliol together, and were, as he said, "very thick." All the rest was newspaper.

"Of course," said Mrs. Carteret, welcoming any plausible theory, "that would go a long way to account for it. I know your uncle would be very much upset. But I can't help thinking if Lord Ownership had been dying, I should have heard. Your uncle would have mentioned it."

"Well—he is dying. The *Times* says so. May I smoke?"

"Of course you may. . . . It isn't strong, I suppose?"

"N-no. Only one of these little bouquets. . . . Never mind! I'll smoke it later, and have a cigarette now."

"Nonsense, child! How particular we are, all of a sudden! Besides, I'm going upstairs directly, and you can have it all to yourself." From which it is clear that lunch is on its very last legs. In fact, coffee is pending.

Mrs. Carteret went upstairs directly, and her son had it all to himself. He had nothing to do but pooh-pooh his alarm about his uncle, so he employed himself that way; also he admitted to his mind a speculation as to whether Cintra would "get on" with Lucy. H'm—Lucy! Well—Miss Hinchliffe then. This was a concession he made to a remonstrance from himself. He must fix up that appointment for the two young ladies to be made known to one another. Wouldn't do to forget that!

He had great faith in Cintra's common sense. No girl could

be freer, for instance, from any trace of nonsensical jealousy of another girl. There were girls like that, he knew; girls who, if they could read their husband's or lover's minds and found in them so much as a recollection of what colour another girl's eyes were, or of the mere outline of her lips—with that little dimple, don't you know, coming and going—would fly into an awful rage directly. Cintra was not that sort. Besides, her faith in him was perfect. Of course, it was natural that it should be, being so well-grounded. There were fellows, whom he knew, who were not to be trusted. However, they generally cottoned to girls of that other sort; so it was diamond-cut-diamond. He then derived a marked satisfaction—or said he did, in his own confidence—from the happy choice his friend had made, complexion perhaps apart.

Lucy—h'm! He tapped the ash off his bouquet, a long ash that left almost no cigar behind, and remarked to himself what a fortunate chap Charley Snaith was to have won the affections of a girl who could see below the surface, who was not taken in by mere superficial appearances. Fred could not disguise from himself the fact that Charley was not exactly an Adonis. But did he try to? He finished his cigar, and was departing to join his mother upstairs, when he heard her coming down slowly. She was looking at a newspaper as she came, to judge by a rustle; one that outclassed the rustle of her silk dress.

"I was sure I was right," said she. "Lord Porchisthorpe's dying—not Lord Ownership at all! Read that."

Fred took the offered *Times*, and read the indicated paragraph. It appeared that the former nobleman had not maintained his slight rally of yesterday, and his medical advisers gave little ground for hope. So the worst was feared and the Countess was sent for. Fred didn't see what Lord Porchisthorpe had to do in the matter. Wasn't Lord Ownership dying too?

"Certainly not. He's going to be married, to the Honourable Miss Somebody Something, a Maid of Honour. . . . No—he's not there. He's in 'Court and Society.'"

Fred found a statement to this effect as indicated, and seemed to accept it on reading the full name of the fortunate lady. But he said:—"I don't see what Lord Porchisthorpe has to do with it. He's dying on his own account."

"Foolish boy! Don't you see that you muddled the two names together? Or Mr. Snaith did."

"I don't see that they are so much alike."

"Yes, they are. At least they are the sort of names that

get mixed up. If you forgot both, you would be just as likely to remember one as the other. But, Fred!"

"But what?"

"Where is your uncle?" Her alarm was unconcealed now, and panic was growing in her voice.

Fred cast about for some new pretence that all was well. A feeble attempt to connect his uncle's absence with the aristocratic wedding failed miserably. He ended by an unreasonable assumption that his uncle must have arrived at the school, by now, or he would have received an answer to his telegram.

"What nonsense, Fred! As if Mrs. Orpen would delay her answer *because* he was there!" And it *was* nonsense.

He who knows the miseries of doubt about an absent person may be able to picture the growing anxiety of Fred and his mother as time passed and no telegram came. Neither suggested that this uneasy vigil might be cut short, and the telegram left to appear as it listed. Least of all did Fred entertain any idea of going away and awaiting its appearance elsewhere. He paced restlessly about, looking from the window for an expected messenger boy on a bicycle, and seeing none.

An unfeeling clock struck three, and no telegram had come. Then presently a knock made Fred jump and begin to say:—"There it is!" But he did not finish his statement, for the knock, which began staccato, and might have been a telegram, ended in a trill and was a visitor—a double-dyed visitor. Mrs. Carteret knew who it was—that tiresome Finch Elliot woman—and she supposed she must be at home. Fred deserted her basely, leaving her to deal with the Finch Elliot alone, and read the first book he chanced on in the back-room—Pepys' Diary, as it happened. But he found Pepys palled, even when he and Mrs. Pepys whipped the servant girl and shut her in the cellar. He could fix his mind on nothing.

Was that confounded Finch Elliot woman never going? Her genial manner, audible through the closed folding door, was exasperating. Her intermittent sudden laugh, like the chatter of some bird Fred had heard at the Zoo, always in anticipation of her audience's recognition of her own humour, was like the waterdrop of the Inquisitorial tormentor. He knew by the tone of her voice when it was going to come, and it came—always a descending *arpeggio* landing on a squeaky jerk, like a note of interrogation, at the end.

He could not make out what it was all about. But there was a Committee; that was something to know. The Committee

was at loggerheads; that was natural—Committees always are! There was an obviously right course before it—or them—and the Finch Elliot woman was on the side of the right. One's informant always is. Did anyone ever yet communicate with a person who was in the wrong? There was a *bête-noire*, Fred gathered from the frequent repetition of a half-heard name in a particular tone of voice. But was it possible that he heard it right? He listened afresh, every time it came, hoping to correct his first impression that it was Stoms. But the Finch Elliot woman gave no quarter, and he had to accept the name, incredulously. Would that idiot of a woman never go? She and her Committee!

At last she said with a pounce that she really *must* go. She had to be there—somewhere or other—at five. Fred thanked the Divine Disposer of Events from the bottom of his heart. She was going and went, with voluble recapitulation to the last moment. Fred listened through his own door, furtively opened, and had the satisfaction of hearing his mother hope that Sir Thomas would give in, throwing a light on Stoms. Then the Finch Elliot woman vanished at last, and Fred went out into the relieved atmosphere to find his mother asking a question of Lipscombe, over the banisters. What was that? . . . Bring it up here, then!

A telegram for Mr. Frederic, and the boy was waiting! Why in Heaven's name then, Lipscombe, bother about the silver tray to put it on? But Lipscombe was a trained parlour maid, and would not bate a jot of etiquette. The yellow envelope came upstairs on its proper conveyance, and usage was not outraged.

"Now, at any rate, we shall know *something*," Mrs. Carteret's fingers were agitated over the envelope, and not at their deftest. Fred said, without reason:—"She's sure to have heard of him. Most likely he's there by *now*," and waited.

But what he waited for did not come—only silence and knowledge why he had no answer. For there could be no doubt of the meaning of his mother's strained look as she read the telegram, and re-read it. "Let me look," said he, and took it from her. He followed her into the drawing-room as he read, half-aloud:—"The Doctor has not been here since he went to London, no news of him has come and no letter. Orpen."

Mrs. Carteret had fallen into a chair when her son looked up at her from the telegram. "What can it mean?" said she, and her voice came short of its intention, and died out.

Fred saw he must plead in arrest of judgment. "Come, I

say, Mother!" said he, "we mustn't allow ourselves to be run away with by . . ."

"By what?"

"Well—we mustn't get in a stew because . . ."

"Because what?"

"Well—you know what I mean; we need not conclude that Uncle Dru has . . . come to grief of any sort, simply because he disappears for a week or so."

"What—not with all the boys just coming back to school you know how particular he was."

"Ye-es. Of course I know all that."

"Has he ever been known to miss the first day of a term?"

"Why—no—perhaps not!"

"Certainly not. It was one of his strong points always. Oh, Fred, something is wrong. I'm sure of it."

"Don't let's be in too great a hurry!"

"I am not in a hurry. But something must be done."

"Something must be done. Yes—but what? That's the point. Look here, Mother! Let me speak to Charley about this, before we do anything."

"Yes—speak to Mr. Snaith. Speak to his partner, Mr. Trymer. See what *he* says." He was a consolatory man, this Mr. Trymer, cool and professional, with an accurate unimpeachable hat. He was the sort of man feebleness at a loss looks to as a magazine of hidden resource: and is, to say the truth, as often as not disappointed in.

CHAPTER VI

"I SAY, Charley, this is a devil of a bad job."

"What is?"

"My uncle can't be found—anywhere."

Mr. Snaith, on the lower landing of their common staircase, looks up at Fred, who has been anxiously awaiting him. The clocks are striking midnight, each at a time of its own selection. "How do you know?" says he, pausing, latchkey in hand.

"I mean—we can't find out where he is. Come up and I'll tell you."

Mr. Snaith puts away his latchkey and comes up, making the face of one who whistles, inaudibly. They go into Fred's domicile, and that young man gives a brief account of the events of his day. "I hung on at my mother's till quite late," he says, concluding it, "because she has no one with her, and of course she's getting in a stew. I don't see that there's anything I could have done."

"You haven't communicated with the police?" This is mere orthodoxy on Mr. Snaith's part—a thing to be said, no more.

"How the dickens can I? Just think, suppose the old boy turns up as right as a trivet—and he may, any minute,—think what a nice rage he'd be in with us for not minding our own business!"

"I see your fix. But how long are we to give him?"

"Blest if I know! He's had a fortnight already—a.l but!" Master Fred has implied, by the way he spoke of his mother, that he himself is *not* in a stew. But he *is*, for all that.

His friend gets through a few bars of that inaudible tune; then says suddenly, as one who means business:—"Who saw him last?"

"My mother, certainly. I've made that out. He left our house in a growler last Saturday week, to go back to Vexton by the five o'clock from Waterloo. . . ."

"Then we must see the station master at Waterloo. . . ."

"Easy a minute! I was going to tell you. He didn't go to Waterloo. He went to Wimbledon, taking that house on the way—our house, you know—The Cedars. At least, he said he should."

"In a growler?"

"So I understood."

"Then we must find that growler."

"How?"

"Advertise for it. Growlers don't take fares all the way to Wimbledon and forget it, in a fortnight. The cabby will remember."

Fred looked uncomfortable. "But suppose my uncle's all right, and sees the advertisement? There'll be a pretty how-do-you-do!"

"Very well, then! Stand the cabby over for a day or two. It won't make any difference. But look here—here's another idea. Why not go down to the house and see if he ever went there? I expect you would find he didn't. Then, after that, fish out the cabby, and find where he did go."

"I'm afraid it won't be any use. There's only an old caretaker there, and she's half-witted. She has an old husband who boozes."

"Caretakers have. But it doesn't matter how great an idiot she is. We only want to know whether he's been there or not. That's not much to recollect."

"I tell you what, Charley. I vote we go to-morrow to the agent at Wimbledon. My uncle must have gone to him first, to get an order to see the house. He'll remember fast enough. My uncle isn't like everybody else."

Thus it came about that next day saw Fred and his friend interviewing the house-agent at Wimbledon. This gentleman suffered from an obliging disposition, showing itself in an idea that it was his duty at all costs to supply an answer in the affirmative to Fred's enquiry whether two Saturdays ago an elderly clerical gentleman had come in a cab for an order to see The Cedars at Merton, and had driven on to see the said house; that being the only theory that held water, as it seemed improbable that his uncle would drive all the way to the house without some security that he would be shown over it. Now this obliging disposition of this house-agent, who had no recollection of such a visitor, prompted him to negotiate for a change in the identity of the Rev. Dr. Carteret, in order to get a ground for an affirmative answer.

He could remember nothing unassisted about the second previous Saturday—or indeed about any past incident, so vast and varied were his business transactions—without referring to a huge folio volume, which seemed to contain all contemporary

history. His forefinger, travelling up and down entries, stopped now and again as though it had a bite from one of them. Once, to say:—"Certainly—certainly—here we have it. Clerical gentleman and young lady, enquiring for residence to suit requirements as follows . . ." But Fred nipped him in the bud, saying that no young lady could be entertained in this connection. And then presently:—"Ah now!—this will be correct, no doubt. 'The Rev. Samuel Smallwood . . .' That *was* the name, I believe, Sir?"

"No—that it wasn't! The Reverend—Drury—Carteret. Nobody else will do."

The house-agent looked as though, if he had not been a meek house-agent, he would have protested, and pointed out the unreasonableness of not being content with the Rev. Samuel Smallwood. Being meek, he had to acquiesce in being damped down in this way, and only said sadly:—"Possibly another gentleman." He continued, in spite of this unfair discouragement, to explore the folio with his forefinger, now and then uttering a new name tentatively, as though to soften the heart of his applicant and bring about a compromise. But Fred was unyielding. He declined to vary the identity of the person he sought in order to accommodate his description, and the house-agent had to acknowledge the circumstance was too strong for him. "No—no such a gentleman!" was his final verdict, and he refused to countenance, as almost irreligious, the idea that anyone should presume to view The Cedars without a permit.

"That proves nothing, Fred," said Mr. Snaith, when they had left the agent's, and were pausing to consider the next step to be taken. "Nothing but that he didn't come here first. He may have gone straight to the house. Even if he didn't see over it, he may have gone there. But if he went, he saw it, why shouldn't he? Caretakers are not tip-proof—very much not."

"We may just as well go and see, to make sure," said Fred. An elaborate description of the whereabouts of the house was wasted on an old fly-driver at the railway station opposite, who listened to it sceptically; consented to accept the job, grudgingly; and took the nosebag off his horse, autocratically. Then when he had wrapped himself in a horse-rug of the date of his vehicle, he turned to say to Fred:—"Any name to this here house?"

"Yes. The Cedars. Big old house—to let."

"If you'd 'a said The Cedars, you'd 'a saved yourself a lecture. I wasn't brought up to talkin', myself."

"But you know the house?"

"I ought to it. I was as good as born there. Anyways, my father died there, and that runs us werry close."

A more liberal education—so Fred thought—might have spoiled this man, whose delicate sense of an antithesis was a thing to cultivate. He ventured on a surmise. Was the nativity of the speaker by any chance somewhere in the near neighbourhood? No,—not to say *near*. It was, in fact, if you went in for being particular, at Basingstoke. But a party being born in Basingstoke was no drorback on his father dying anywhere you might name. It was open to him to die in 'Ackney, Camberwell, 'Oxton, or the West Ingies if you come to that. As a matter of fact this fly-driver's father had died at this very house, The Cedars; and there was no use saying he hadn't.

Mr. Snaith showed an interest in this man. "I like the old cock," said he, *sotto voce*, to Fred, "because he's so combative. What would he say if he knew how particular we have to go in for being in our profession? Try and get out of him what was his father's status or capacity at The Cedars. He wasn't a patient—I'm clear about that. . . . Why? because patients at private asylums like this belong to the Better Sort. I don't suppose this man's father had property."

"I hope he wasn't a patient, because I can't ask if he was," said Fred. He decided on finding some elliptical form of expression, to deprive his enquiry of any invidious character. He addressed the native of Basingstoke as soon as the latter had succeeded in reaching the person of an invisible boy, who was hanging on behind, with his whip-lash, and had disconnected him effectually. "I've been told the house belonged to a celebrated doctor, who took in nerve-cases. Your father wasn't a nerve-case, I suppose?"

"Not he! He knoo better. His horfice was to look after these here *nerve-cases*. Only that warn't the name he called 'em by. *Looneys* was what he put it at, and I've an idea he was right, myself. He used to give 'em treatment."

"What sort of treatment?"

"Tokoo, I reckon. In course he gave 'em what-for, to recollect him by, when they got houtrageous. But this here treatment was reg'lar downright Science, and no 'umbug. He wrote a parmphlet, Dr. Aytcholt did . . ."

"Was that his name? Say it again."

"Haytch. Holt. Got it? . . . Well, this here parmphlet was consarnin' of The Use of Anti-Irritants in Mental Cases. Some on 'em would 'a made you larf."

"Which? Tell us about the Anti-Irritants."

"Well—there was the Mutule Aggerawation Treatment. For to perdoose the very maximum of hirritation and bring it out like. Like a hee-ruption."

"How did he do it? It must have been fun."

"That's accordin' as you look at it. I can tell you how he done it. He took a couple of extra-violent patients, and put 'em in adjinin' apartments with a winder between, plate glass a hinch thick it was, so they could see each other but not hear a sound. Then each o' these here two violent patients, ye see, took it the other was a kicking of him, and flowed at him in pursooance of the idea, and hit hisself against the glarst of the winder. Good job there was no neighbours handy in them days!"

"Because of the noise. I see. But was the treatment a success?"

"Warn't it?—if the doctor warn't a liar. All the patients was completely cured, barring one who killed hisself against the glarst. Soo-icide while of unsound mind was the werdict. Because the doctor he p'inted out that the treatment was Scientific."

The fares were rather sorry the journey was so short, as further facts might have come to light concerning the cure of insanity by Dr. Aytcholt. But they had arrived at the desolation that was ripe for building, and there was the house, and there the trees it took its name from. The old deaf woman was at the gate, looking up and down the road with a jug in her hand. A vanishing potboy, who could whistle through his front teeth, was departing, and the old husband was visible at the side door of the house, at the end of the gravel pathway. When he saw the visitors, he turned his back and disappeared.

The old woman did not seem very communicative, when Fred had stated the object of his visit. Perhaps he was in too great a hurry with it, and that made her "suspicious." Persons of her sort require delicate handling. "Old gentleman? No!—we don't have no old gentlemen come here, or very seldom."

"That's absurd," said Fred in an undertone to his friend. "As if people looking over premises went by ages and sexes!"

"She *has* had an old gentleman here, or she wouldn't have said she hadn't," said Mr. Snaith, astutely.

"Right you are, Charley! Nothing like the legal mind, after all! . . . Look here, missus! You scrape your intelligence together. . . . Oh, can't you hear as loud as that? Then I

must shout louder. . . . He had on a parson's costume, this old gentleman, and it was Saturday fortnight, about four in the afternoon."

"What did you say he had on?"

"A parson's costume."

"What's that?"

"A clergyman's dress."

Now, by this time Mrs. Grewbeer had collected herself, and had also recognised Fred as a previous visitor. She saw her way to surrendering her little attitude of reserve—which may have been produced by Fred's evident anxiety to get an answer—and at the same time of imputing obscurity, a great delight with the uncultured, as well as the cultured, mind. Said she:—"There now, if you'd 'a said he was dressed like a clergyman, then I should have knowed." But having made this admission, she was seized with a perverse desire to vary the day. Vainly did Fred say that if she was referring to *his* old gentleman, it *must* be Saturday fortnight; on no other day in the calendar was he a human possibility. The reply was:—"I think you'll find you're mistook, but my old man he'll know."

"Let her have her own way, Fred," said Mr. Snaith. "What does it matter?" And they followed the old woman to the house.

Referred to for confirmation, Mr. Grewbeer was disappointing. He declined to commit himself to anything. "Ye see, gentlemen," said he. "I never see the party. I only heerd tell of him next day. He was here when I come, I take it, but I never set eyes on him myself. I wasn't by way of taking notice much, by token I'd met with an accident, being fetched home in a gentleman's cart, who's in the coal and potato line. My old woman she see the party, and what she can't tell you, there's no use asking."

"But you know which day it was, as you had an accident. That's something to recollect by." But Mr. Grewbeer seemed to evade admission that it was Saturday, no doubt disliking anything that threw a light on the nature of his accident. He conceded the point, however, indirectly. He couldn't be particular to the exact day, but next day was Sunday, if you came to that.

"As we do come to that, Charley," said Fred, "it must have been Saturday. Now what I want to find out is, which way did my uncle go *when* he left . . ."

"Stop a bit, Fred. Let me do the interrogation. And don't

you be in too great a hurry. Let's hear the good woman." And then Mr. Snaith "elicited," in approved style, that the clerical gentleman had come in a four-wheel cab, which he dismissed, and had been admitted to see the house. At this point the old woman become suddenly communicative, having lighted on a rich vein of irrelevant matter, and insisted on giving the fullest particulars of everything her hearers did not want to know. Fred showed impatience, but his friend said *sotto voce*:—"Bottle up, Frederic: she'll tell us more if we give her her head."

Carefully recalled to the point more than once, Mrs. Grewbeer was induced to admit that she had let Dr. Carteret in through the front door, her introduction of him to each room of the house in turn, his dissatisfaction with them, not without dramatic reference to his condemnations—in which Fred could recognise his uncle's identity,—and finally the fact that she had not seen his departure from the house, being called away. Here she showed a strong tendency to dwell upon the treatment of wounds and bruises, and to leave her visitor unaccounted for. Fred's impatience got the better of him, and made him interpose on this.

"Yes—but what we want to know is, which way did he go? Back to the station, or . . .?" He stopped at a glance from his friend, which he knew meant:—"Don't suggest!"

"I never see no more of him."

"Do you mean that when you went to look for him you couldn't find him?" Now the story knows that the old woman did not go back, and practically forgot all about her visitor.

"I never went to look for him till he wasn't there, next day. I'd my hands full, and plenty to see to, without showing parties out. Lard!—he'd only got to stand the door open and walk through the front gate."

"Did nobody see him go? That's what I want to get at?" This questioning was of course Fred's, and showed impatience.

Old Grewbeer, having been drunk, and knowing it, was at some disadvantage in taking the tone of superiority to feminine weakness of judgment which he would have affected another time, as a matter of course. But he felt that a hint in this direction would not be misplaced. "Ye see, master," said he, in confidence to Fred; "the missus was a bit upset. That's what *she* was. Females is. But I tell ye this much, for all I was knocked a bit silly by this here mishap o' mine, that young Pritchett, the son of the party I named to you just now, he was

out at that there front gate, a seein' to the 'orse, and he see the old gentleman come out, and walk away towards Wimbledon."

"What's that you're a sayin', Grewbeer?" The old woman interrupted him tartly, whereupon he repeated this little effort of fiction, louder. "I thought you said young Pritchett said he see no one."

"That's as may be," was the reply. "But I said he was a young liar. And a young liar he is. Why—in course he saw the gentleman come out, 'cos he must have come out. And where would you expect him to go, barring the station? T'other road don't lead nowhere, not even to the moon."

"You now perceive, Frederic—I hope—the difficulties that beset the collection of evidence. Thank Heaven, my friend, that you are not a lawyer." Mr. Snaith followed this up by remarking that Mr. Grewbeer had imputed to an habitual liar the statement that he would have made, had he been truthful in accordance with his—Mr. Grewbeer's—own conceptions of what "must have been" the truth.

"Well then," said Fred, "the long and short of it is, that no one here saw my uncle go, whatever Pritchett Junior says he did or didn't see."

"He says he didn't," said the old man doggedly. "And bein' a liar by natur'—and all boys is as ever I had to do with—you may take it from me he did. I can't say no fairer than that."

"I'm afraid, Charley," said Fred, "the obstacles to the collection of evidence are so strong in this quarter that—well—we shan't get at anything worth having. He came *here* though; that's *something*."

"I expect the old chap may be right, though he's a fool." Short of whispering, side-speech in confidence did not reach its subject, so Mr. Grewbeer remained unconscious of this description of him. "Your uncle came here, and walked away to Wimbledon. We'll see the station master. . . . Be easy, old chap!—we shall solve the mystery—most likely find a letter when we get back. They'll have heard from him at the school. *He'll* be all right." But Fred looked very unsettled, for he knew his friend would affect confidence, however little he felt it.

Being here, would it not be as well to take another look round the house? It was Mr. Snaith's suggestion, made with an idea of diverting his friend's mind from an uneasiness he thought exaggerated. It was very effective, as Fred quite became himself again over the new entrance lobby, rendered necessary by the proposed bisection of the house. It was to be made by throw-

ing a small room into the passage from which rose the present back-staircase. The room so thrown was to recover its footing and do duty as a spacious entrance hall, having led a humble life as a sort of pantry in past ages. But the transformation of the stairs was the thing to look forward to.

"I tell you what, Charley, if you have this half, I shall envy you your stairs. Look at that balustrade! Did anyone ever see such a finial as this on the corner post?"

"Very good, old chap! You shall have this side. I'll take t'other. Subject, of course!"

"Subject to what?"

"Subject to my young woman, of course—Lucy. She'll have to go up and down stairs—up and down those very stairs. Or the other ones, as may be. I say, Fred, what a lark it will be!"

All of us have an undercurrent self, that we have to ignore very often; because, if it got the bit in its teeth, it would put us in such an absurdly false position. It is that self whose intensely cryptic character—whose invisibility, inaudibility, intangibility—is so often a source of satisfaction to us. How often has each of us said to himself—his everyday self, just below the surface:—"Thank God that you and I have this mischief-maker well in hand, and can ignore him! Let's!" How often has this everyday self exclaimed thereon, with marked indignation:—"What—that impostor again! Crush him, silence him, stamp him out! Or, as you can't do that, at least cultivate—with me—a disbelief in his existence. Shut the door of his cellar, and forget him. All the visitors to Our house are shown into the drawing-room. No one ever explores the back-yard or the basement." And you have slapped your everyday self on the back, and said—somewhat on the lines of Little Jack Horner—what a good, upright, honest, wholesome-minded fellow he was!

It was that undercurrent self, this tale suspects, to which Fred Carteret said at this moment:—"I hope this Miss Hinchliffe—Lucy, h'm!—doesn't mean to be so confoundedly pretty when she's going up and down those very stairs." And to this his everyday self replied:—"Pooh—rubbish! Wait till you see her again, and you will see that she is mere dead-sea fruit compared to your Cintra. Wait till you see them together, anyhow!" Whereupon Fred went through the form of perceiving that it was his truer self that spoke.

All this is an attempt at analysing the protoplasm of Fred's mind during the three seconds, at most, that passed between

his friend's apostrophe about the propitious future, and his reply:—"Won't it? Now suppose we have a quiet run over the house and get some measurements . . . Oh yes!—I've got my little foot-rule. My dear boy, I never move without it."

They walked about the empty rooms, shadowed by Mrs. Grewbeer with keys, in her character of caretaker. What she was protecting, and against what, was not clear. But it was tacitly admitted that something would have gone wrong, some unpardonable neglect of her pledges to that agency would have been committed, if she had not kept a watchful eye on Fred's measurements, and rigidly checked Mr. Snaith's entries in his pocket-book, which were to be the basis of a rough sketch-plan of the requisite alterations. Needless to say, Fred conceived himself competent to assume the character of an architect, on occasion shown. Indeed, it was only modesty thrown in, gratis, that induced him to say, at times, that of course the builder would have to make a working-drawing of this or that.

Mrs. Grewbeer, however, did not contribute speech to this forecasting of modifications in the house. She kept an oblique eye askant, like that of the little pig Horace sacrificed, on the actions of her two visitors, and seemed to be assuming they were machinations till the contrary was proved. If a semblance can be compounded from that of a Red Indian waiting to scalp a victim; a pew-opener waiting to lock up, after showing you an interesting church; and perhaps a touch of the mute who occurs on your doorstep after your decease, you may safely ascribe that semblance to Mrs. Grewbeer.

"Galoptious room for a dance, this, Fred!" said Mr. Snaith in the large drawing-room five windows long. "Lucy will have to borrow it if it's yours, and your missus will have to borrow it if it's ours."

"We shan't quarrel over that, Charley," said Fred, pretending to be the older and wiser of the two. "Seventeen-foot-nine inches exactly from the recess of the window." That was the depth of the room. Mr. Snaith made an entry, and Mrs. Grewbeer's appearance was of disbelief in its accuracy.

There was a kind of pleasure in this methodical collection of data; which, with the natural builder's estimate to follow, constituted a sort of official oblivion of every contemporary unpleasantness; chiefly of course the painful doubt about the whereabouts of the all-powerful Trustee, without whose signature every scheme must be abortive. It was as though each of the two young men said to the other:—"Please don't suppose that I

am the least uneasy about the absentee. He is going to turn up all right. That's arranged." Each of them, to convince the other, made a parade of deliberation over these preliminary notes; and only laid himself open to suspicion by overdoing the assumption that the destiny of the premises was as good as settled.

"And what did the old gentleman say about this room?" said Fred, suddenly taking Mrs. Grewbeer into the confidence of the discussion, as she prepared to "shetter to the window now you had seen all you wanted to." These were her own words. But she did not hear the question, or she would not have shouted "Hay?" with the undisguised violence of a high explosive. Fred repeated his words in short articulate groups.

"Ho—the old clargyman! Somethin' I didn't ketch. That's what *he* said. . . . What was my idear what he said, do you mean? He warn't satisfied. Can't tell you no more. I didn't arst him what he said. . . . Ah, yes,—he'd 'a told me fast enough if I'd 'a arsted him. But I didn't arst him."

"You would not presume on your position, Mrs. Grewbeer. Was that it?" Mr. Snaith repented of this word by the way, for the old woman insisted on knowing what the other gentleman was a saying of, and received a revised version with suspicion. This, however, was soothed, and she said:—"Ho yes—I know my place, if that's what you mean. But he warn't satisfied, by reason of the size of it."

"Not room enough?" A joint-stock question, from both, which has to be repeated beyond the claims of any reasonable deafness.

However, there was a ground for this. "Lard bless you!" said the old woman. "I didn't say smallness. I said size. If I'd said *smallness* now, you might have talked."

"She evidently would take exception to geometry, over the word *magnitude*," said Mr. Snaith, secure of inaudibility.

Fred nodded assent. "But it's not such a *very* big room, Charley," said he. "Only twenty-eight by seventeen!"

They went room by room over all the upper stories, though each was waiting to welcome any readiness on the other's part to get back to the railway station and interview an imaginary station master with a keen memory. But inner conscience deciding that it was desirable to avoid showing anything but profound indifference, they overhauled the house with a thoroughness it might have waited for in vain under other circumstances. In time, however, every dimension was on record in Mr. Snaith's

book, and they came down the main stairway qualified to suggest drastic alterations in the upper floors.

"Now, don't you be in any hurry, Charley. The cab will wait. It's that sort of cab. I want to take a good look at that new square room, because I've got an idea."

"Oh ah, yes—in the new part of the house. We mustn't forget that. Let's see!—that's the square room over by the . . . over by the . . ."

"Over by the long passage into the greenhouse. Gee-up! Cut along!"

"Do not be impatient, Frederic. The cab, as you say, will wait. How about the dimensions of this room?"

"Corresponds with the one on the other side. Cut along!"

Mr. Snaith complied with the spirit of this direction, and they arrived at the door of the square room. The lock wanted oil—wouldn't act, and provoked comment. While Mrs. Grewbeer reasoned with it, the young men went three paces and stood where the Rev. Dr. Carteret had stood when last seen.

"This passage ends in the green'us, Frederic. You don't want the dimensions of the green'us. You know you don't."

"I know nothing of the sort, Charley. I know I do. You lawyer chaps always want to do everything by halves. Wait till you're an engineer—that'll make you sit up. . . . No—the door isn't shut. It's open. May as well have a look round!" This was the greenhouse door, which had been found unexpectedly open by the caretakers when last examined, and left unlocked when the substantial closure of the further door into the garden had been established.

"I don't see much here," said Fred, after a glance round. "Let's go back to the square room and settle that." So they went back.

Now, it chanced that the lawyer-chap, perhaps to prove that his profession had been unjustly censured, delayed a little to make sure that that door was properly secured, so far as circumstances permitted. When he had done so he followed his friend, but was met by him returning, as though to look for him, at the corner of the passage.

"What made you sing out?" said Fred.

"I didn't sing out."

"Well—I heard you pretty plain. 'Come back, Fred!'" If this had implied merely that the speaker had thought he heard speech but must have been mistaken, probably his hearer's surprise would have stopped short of a shrug. Mr. Snaith's went

beyond shrug-point. "I say, Fred," said he, "don't go dotty, that's a good feller! Consider Miss Fraser. I never sang out 'Come back, Fred!'"

"You never sang out 'Come back, Fred!' Why—I heard you."

"I say, Frederic, this is getting alarmin'. I tell you what it is, old chap. It's the looneys. It's the atmosphere of the asylum."

"Well—you may chaff! But I *did* hear you. 'Come back, Fred.' Just like that!" He imitates the tone of the words he ascribes to his friend.

"What—like a drill-sergeant? I never speak like a drill-sergeant. It's not professional. Shut up rot, dear boy, and come and measure walls and chimley-places. Come along!"

"I tell you what, Charley," says Fred, still puzzled. "It's a parrot. There's a parrot somewhere. They'll pick up a phrase and repeat it, so that it sounds like your own voice. Depend on it—it's a parrot."

"Frederic, your theory won't hold water. A parrot will not utter what he does not know, and when have I said 'Come back, Fred' in the hearing of a parrot? Or anywhere else, for that matter! Shut up—you and your parrot!"

But Fred will have that voice accounted for, and clings to his parrot. The old woman, influenced maybe by the perplexity visible on his face, and tracing it to his friend's words, asks:—

"What is the gentleman saying, mister?"

"Says you haven't got a parrot."

"No nearer than my kitchen. Does he want a carrot?"

"Not carrot—parrot. Par-rot! He says you don't keep one."

"No more I don't. I ain't partial to birds." But her curiosity seems aroused, for she goes on to say:—"What put the gentleman onto parrots?" Shouting details into deaf ears is not inviting, but for all that Fred seems to find it a satisfaction to make some sort of reply, rough-sketching the incident. To the surprise of both, the old woman lays claim to having heard "a soomat" and, being pressed to be more explicit, describes the soomat by admitting that she had thought the young gentleman a bit hasty-tempered. For she too had supposed Mr. Snaith to be the speaker. He seems inclined to become a disciple of Mr. Grewbeer's school of Logic, and to claim audibility by a stone-deaf person as a direct proof that nothing has ever been uttered. Fred ascribes this to his legal mind, and they

discuss the nature of evidence as he takes his last measurements. But nothing casts light upon the sound he mistook for his friend's voice. He admits, however, that he did not identify it as his by the sound, but by the impossibility of its being any one else's.

Then they depart, both being really glad to do so now that deliberation has been emphasized sufficiently.

Fred's sanguine disposition had, by the time they got back to the railway station, filled his mind with the image of an improbable station master, able to remember all passengers for a month past. He was disflustered, on enquiring of the actual functionary whether he had chanced to notice; last Saturday week, an impressive ecclesiastic who booked for Exeter, by the five o'clock from Waterloo. The momentary hope held out by the enquiry:—"What class?"—which seemed to show a conscientious keenness for accuracy—was damped by the sequel:—"No—I couldn't speak to anyone in particular, short of Bishops. You can't make it a Bishop, I suppose?" This was impossible, and further enquiry showed that the inferior clergy would come fifty in a lump, like aunts on an aunt-hill. No—that functionary could supply no information, and felt that candour had better say so at once, and be done with it. His abilities did not lie in the direction of cooking up, and where would be the object of it, if they did? Misinformation could be made no use of, to any good purpose; and a humane disposition would keep in check the propensity to tell unprovoked lies common to all humanity.

"Anyhow," said Mr. Snaith consolatorily, as they rode back to Waterloo, "that's better than remembering distinctly that no such person has ever been at the station. Never mind, Fred! Ten to one when you get back you'll find your mother has had a letter. The Divine Ordainer of Events enjoys nothing better than upsetting one's equilibrium, and then deriding one for being in a fuss."

CHAPTER VII

"WHAT a very extraordinary thing!" said Cintra Fraser to her sister Nancy, reading letters at breakfast two mornings later. Only she did not say what the extraordinary thing was, but went on reading, with an animated face, in which her sister's eye, waiting for further particulars, could detect as much anxiety as amusement.

"Don't hurry!" said Nancy, pouring coffee. Cintra went on to the next page, and said:—"In a minute."

A very small boy, who gave the impression that he was overfed, but too elastic to burst, laid down conditions under which he would accept a change of diet. "If I put'th in the thooger mythelf," he said.

"Very well," said Nancy. "You shall have bread-and-milk instead of porridge, and shall put in the sugar yourself." This was treachery, because the young lady knew perfectly well that her half-brother regarded free access to the sugar-basin as part of the treaty. Her apology to her conscience was sufficient. He was a Young Turk.

Cintra read on a page or two. Then the interest seemed to flag, and she laid the letter aside, and asked how many spoonfuls her sister had put in the teapot. Being answered:—"Plenty," she seemed to doubt her informant; for she said:—"Very well then, I shall wait, or it will be hot water." Then waiting, she harked back to her first remark. "Well—it really is very extraordinary. Fred's uncle has vanished."

"While they were looking at him?"

"Nonsense, Nancy, you know I don't mean that."

"How was I to know?"

"Don't be a goose. Now you may pour my tea. Only stir it. Of course Dr. Carteret's gone somewhere, only it is very odd that nobody knows where. And all the schoolboys waiting for him!"

A younger brother—a whole brother this time—who had become far advanced in breakfast while his sisters still lingered on the outskirts, said in one sentence:—"Won't he wollup it into 'em when he does come back shouldn't wonder if I had some more bacon after all!" He proceeded to commandeer the bacon without any appearance of wonder.

Said Nancy:—"What a horrible boy you are, Eric! You never mean to say the arrears mount up?"

"The what?"

"The arrears mount up. All the floggings together, in one?"

"Oh—I see what you mean! Don't I neither though! They do like that at our school, only it's impositions. One of our boys has twenty-four thousand lines of the Odyssey to say before he gets off, and everyone knows there are not twenty-four thousand lines in the Odyssey. Young Samuels says there are, but he's an ass."

Nancy ignores the ingenuous youth's prattle, and goes back to the lost thread of the conversation. "But isn't it serious, Cit?"

"Isn't what serious?"

"Dr. Carteret."

"His not turning up? Why, no—because how *can* anything have happened to him? He's all right. Most likely he's there by now. Is that papa coming down?"

The story follows this trivial conversation thus closely that its reader may concept—and that's a very good word, whatever he may say to the contrary,—what a slight impression was produced by the first hearing of Dr. Carteret's disappearance. One thing was the intrinsic impossibility of anything having happened. Another was the fact that he belonged to a previous generation, and was uninteresting. That weighed with these girls, at any rate. It may be that Nancy got on the edge of an uneasy feeling about him, owing to the fascination Fred's mother exercised over her. That enchantment must have extended to her dry old brother-in-law, and was it possible that it would be a matter of indifference to her if he was run over by a railway train, or murdered by a professional? But Cintra dismissed Uncle Drury easily. *He* was all right!!

Moreover, there was other matter in the letter to think of. Cintra introduced it tentatively by saying, in an unexplained way, merely the words "Miss Lucy Hinchliffe," and then going on reading to herself.

"What about Miss Hinchliffe?" Nancy asked the question sternly, and repeated it when her sister ignored it and went on reading.

"Will we—us two—go to lunch on Sunday to meet Mr. Snaith and his Miss Lucy Hinchliffe? Fred wants to know, by return."

"Very well, then—say *no*!! At least, you may go if you like, of course. That's your own lookout. But I distinctly *won't*!"

"Oh—well!—if you *want* to be disagreeable, of course!"

"I don't want to be disagreeable. But I draw the line at Mr. Snaith."

Cintra shrugged her shoulders, to express to the Universe that her sister could scarcely be held responsible for her actions, and that she herself was a rare example of patience under trials, especially those incidental to dealing with persons of unsound mind. Presently she collected herself for speech, and faced the subject; not unconciliatorily, but decisively. "I cannot understand your prejudice against Mr. Snaith, Nancy. He is not Adonis, I admit. But so many men are not Adonis. Nothing is more misleading than externals. And Fred says there are few more rising men than Mr. Charles Snaith." Cintra felt that she had spoken on behalf of her lover's friend in well-chosen language.

It did not impress Miss Nancy, who only said drily:—"I'm glad you admit that Mr. Snaith is not Adonis, Cit. But, anyhow, I don't want to lunch with him; or his nose; or his Miss Lucy Hinchliffe."

Cintra, going back on her letter, was aware of a postscript overlooked. "Here's a message to you from Fred's mother," said she to her sister. "She says do please come, because she wants you to talk about serious things to, while we chatter. There now, Nance, you'll have her all to yourself."

Nancy wavered, and then made concession. She wouldn't promise, but would think about whether she would come. Only it must be distinctly on condition that she shouldn't have to speak to Mr. Snaith or his Miss Hinchliffe. And she would write to Mrs. Carteret explaining that if she saw Mr. Snaith's nose at lunch she would be unable to eat anything.

This debate and decision was intersected a good deal by the father of the family, Professor Fraser, who would meddle with the establishing of breakfast on a tray for the mamma of the small half-brother, who was an invalid upstairs. He never would be satisfied that proper attention was being given to the wants of that excellent lady. Perhaps they were not. The Professor had rashly adventured on *secondes noces* in order that his little girls might have a mamma, and his little girls had grown up, and were in revolt against *ex post facto* parentage. They forgave their half-brother, on the ground that, at the period of his entry into this world, he appeared too young to be held answerable for it. Moreover, whereas in his very earliest youth he struck the observer as amorphous, purple, and ill-tempered,

his comparative maturity at this date was succulent and pulpy. It was Nancy who remarked that, bad as was the heart, and low as were the morals, of this Young Turk—he was between two and three at breakfast that morning—you might wallow in the back of his neck with advantage. Cintra tolerated him also, on the score of texture and consistency.

Neither of these young women extended their leniency to the Turk's mother. It is true that they complied with the Dictates of Christianity, one of which is—or may be; for the story is out of its depth on this subject—that you should send your enemy his breakfast on a tray when he is indisposed, and see that the toast is fresh made. But they disallowed even the most formal official maternity to the fast-breaker in this case, and the Professor had given up any attempt to use the designation "your mamma" in face of the severity and chilliness with which they had received it, shortly before the date of this present writing. In fact, there was the unsubsidied ripple of a last night's ruction on this very subject when the Professor made his appearance at breakfast. He had to wrestle with serious difficulties when he spoke of his wife to his daughters, as there was absolutely no name to call her by. To call her "your stepmother" would have been to throw up the sponge. And to call her "Mrs. Pauncefote Fraser" was impossible. He had only one resource to fall back upon, and he flew to it.

"Your-Aunt-if-you-persist-in-calling-her-so-Felicia's breakfast, are they going to take it up? Because she's ready for it. . . . Yes—tea and one egg—three minutes and a half; not more! Good-morning, child!" This was to Nancy, with whom he was never on very bad terms. Her kissing him softened away surviving consciousness of the feud overnight.

Cintra dissociated herself from this conciliatory attitude. "Yes—she can have the pot now as far as I'm concerned—Stilzchen's mamma, I mean. Why doesn't Fisher bring that egg?" It was difficult for the Professor to lay hold of this, having recognised this name—short for Rumpfelstilzchen, the dwarf in the German fairy story—as a fit and proper name for his youngest son, and there being no doubt of his parentage. He shied off the subject, and considered his own breakfast. Fisher came with the egg, and bore the tray away to the unpopular stepmother.

A door slammed afar, and was interpreted as that boy Eric, just off to school. His father remarked that he would be late, probably truly: and opened letters. Throughout the whole of

these incidents the three-year-old continued to tranquilly assimilate bread-and-milk without turning a hair, or showing the slightest disposition to leave off. He illuminated the proceedings with occasional remarks, usually introducing topics of personal interest quite foreign to the subjects under discussion.

"I has the scrope-dish in my barf," he said suddenly, neither soap nor soap-dishes having been referred to. No one paid the slightest attention. He turned to another matter: "Nurse's toofs won't boyt scrust, only scrumb." Nancy said that according to her experience, good little boys devoted themselves to eating their breakfasts, and abstaining from conversation on abstract subjects. Conrad—that, it appeared, was his name—seemed to think the two things compatible. He would take some strobby dam, helped wiv the big spoon.

"Well—and what's the news?" said the little Professor; as a stimulus to interchange of thought, rather than from anxiety for information. "Who's married? Who's murdered his wife? Who's murdered himself? What's the latest intelligence?"

"Tell him about your Fred's uncle, Cit."

"What—Dr. Drury Carteret? He hasn't got a wife to murder, poor fellow! Perhaps he's going to be married? That or suicide—which is it?"

"Nonsense, Papa!—how can you? Fancy 'Uncle Dru' going to be married!" Cintra seems so amused at this idea that she ignored murder and suicide.

"Well—what is it, then? Have they made him a Duke?"

"No—guess again! Go on guessing."

"Have they made him a Marquis?"

"That's silly. Guess reasonable guesses!"

"No, I can't. Give it up! What's come to the Reverend? . . . Yes—another half-cup, only not too much milk. And your half-roll you haven't devoured. . . . What's happened to the headmaster?"

"He's disappeared—vanished! . . . No—I'm in earnest."

The learned Professor fixed an astonished eye on his speaking daughter, Cintra, and left his knife at pause half-way through the captured roll. Nancy, purveying the requisitioned half-cup, said:—"Read him the bit of Fred's letter with it in it. . . . There's only one lump of sugar, but it's a big one."

Cintra read:—"It's very odd about Uncle Dru—he never went to the school at all last Saturday fortnight—he went to see the house as he said he would, and went on to Wimbledon—we know that—Charley and I went there to find out—but they've

heard nothing of him at the school—and it fidgets my mother a good deal—with all these stories about people who forget their identity—I'm not uneasy myself—no more is Charley—but anything of this sort is always odd and uncomfortable.' That's all—all he says about his uncle. It is odd, isn't it? I suppose he'll be all right, somewhere or other."

"Somewhere or other," says the Professor. "Or somewhere else. Rather funny though!"

"I shall go to Maida Vale this afternoon, and see what I can hear." Thus Nancy. And then her sister asks her abruptly:—"Does she bother much about the old gentleman? I mean, suppose anything happened?"

"My dear Cit, he's her husband's brother, and just like her own."

"Well—I know! Only one can't help getting the idea with some people that they wouldn't cry their eyes out if . . ."

"Oh no—nothing of the sort! What an unfeeling little beast you are! But there isn't the slightest reason to suppose that anything *has* happened to Dr. Carteret, merely because . . ."

"Well—of course one quite understands *that*." Cintra quashes every unpropitious contingency with decisive tartness, and the Professor embarks upon a sort of soothing chorus:—"Oo—noo—no! No necessity to suppose any such thing! People always disappeared—been at it ever since I was a small boy!! Always turn up again—always turn up again!"

Master Conrad, or Stiltchen, strikes into the conversation with the lip of his bread-and-milk basin in his mouth. Being instructed that this is not a courtly practice he discontinues it, and pursues the thread of his remarks *ore rotundo*, to the effect that his nurse—whose absence for a holiday seems to be the reason he is breakfasting outside the nursery—has countenanced his spitting in the fireplace, under reservations. "Only not two times, nor free times, nor sisk times, nor teng times, but wunth," summarises the terms of a treaty which the public feeling of his hearers condemns as an outrage on civilisation. It is impressed upon him that no little boy of a pure taste and right feeling ever spits at all, in the fire or elsewhere. He distorts the conversation to his own advantage by a claim to logical consecutiveness at variance with fact, saying as an irresistible conclusion to these injunctions:—"Ven you must dive me two coyks, wiv jam insoyd."

"What am I to say to Fred about this Miss Hinchliffe?" says Cintra to her sister, to arrive at a definite arrangement.

THE OLD MADHOUSE

"Well—I'll come. Only I'm not to have to speak to Mr. Snaith. Remember!" Nancy's voice is one of solemn warning.

"Very well, dear!—you shan't speak to Mr. Snaith. Only you've got not to be rude to Miss Hinchliffe."

"As if I didn't know how to behave myself. . . . No, child!—you are not to have any more of anything. You—have—had—your breakfast! Now be good and perhaps I'll take you for a walk. Oh, you little ducky!"

"How you do spoil that child, Nancy!"

"How did you find Mrs. Carteret, Nancy? As lovely as ever, I suppose!"

"Yes—but worried! Worried to death over this plaguy old gentleman. I really have no patience with people who disappear. . . . Oh yes!—I know. He *may* be dead—but he isn't. Trust him!" There are two schools among the constituents of absentees; their relicts, so to speak. The one believes them maimed or dead until they come galumphing home; the other pictures them in the enjoyment of robust health and congenial society, until their fragments are carried up to the front door, held precariously together by first-aid bandages. Nancy belonged to the latter persuasion.

"I wonder what *has* become of him?"

"I shouldn't if I were you. It's very easy. He had to go away somewhere and wrote to say so, and it never reached. Good gracious me!—don't letters get delivered at the wrong house and the people never give them back to the postman?"

"Yes—but a fortnight!"

"A fortnight's nothing! Didn't a letter of Papa's go to the Filipopulos' down the road and they waited six weeks for us to send for it? And didn't that nice old Mr. Filipopulo bring it to us himself at last and it was only Coals—Lowest Summer Prices? That's how people do. They'll have heard when we go on Sunday. You'll see!"

This fragment of conversation followed Nancy's visit to Mrs. Carteret, that afternoon. She had found her still courageously ready to pooh-pooh the idea of "anything having happened" to her brother-in-law. But her courage had broken down as her visitor's own misgivings became manifest. For of course Nancy Fraser's bluster about miscarriage of letters was the merest affectation, and she was a very poor adherent of her own philosophy when she thought to herself what was meant by a head-

master's unexplained absence on the first schoolday after the Easter vacation.

Moreover, she and Mrs. Carteret had closely analysed the position, and had come to the conclusion that the tracing of the missing man to Wimbledon station had made matters worse instead of better. From Fred's report it was practically certain that he had departed by the five-o'clock train for Vexton Junction. And how he could be deflected from his destination on such an old familiar route was beyond mortal comprehension! Nothing short of being murdered and thrown out on the line could have done it. Their conversation had been haunted by a grisly phantom of a corpse in a tunnel, overlooked in the dark by passing trains, and a more probable—and rather less discomfiting—one in a ditch at the bottom of an embankment in a cleverly schemed invisible corner. These phantoms never took actual form for either, but each was aware of their possibility in the mind of the other. As far as speech went, each stoutly maintained an attitude of confidence that, though one could not see why a bad disaster was intrinsically impossible, there could be no serious doubt that it was so. To waver on the point would have been a concession to Despair, waiting to pounce on stragglers on the very doorstep of Hope. Their last tribute to this confidence was a pretence that they could dismiss the gruesome subject from their minds and talk about something else; for instance, the Miss Hinchliffe who was to be on view next Sunday.

"You mustn't repeat it to a living soul, dear Mrs. Carteret, and I know you won't . . . will you?" Nancy stopped for a confirmation.

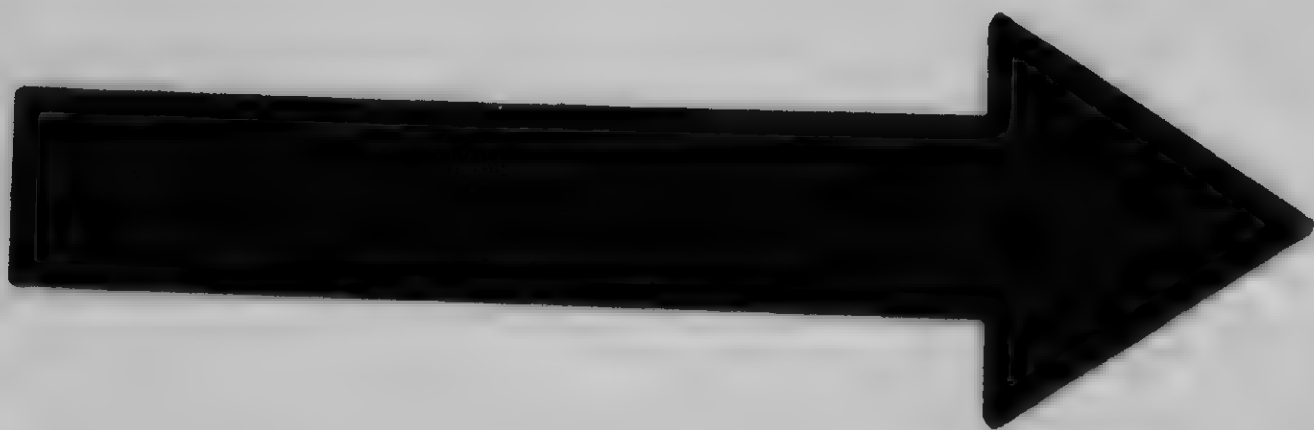
"I think it ought to depend a little on what it is, oughtn't it?" said Mrs. Carteret. "However—I'll risk it, and promise. Go on."

"Well—it is that I detest Snaith. Unjustly, no doubt. The fact remains, that detest him I do, and always shall. But it makes me all the more curious to see the girl who can . . . well—to put it plainly—let Snaith kiss her. You don't mind my putting it plainly?" Nancy was sketching Mr. Snaith's nose on the hearthrug with her parasol.

"Not at all. It seems to me that all parties will have to look the fact in the face, sooner or later—the kissing, I mean. And it's their lookout, you know, not yours. . . . I wonder where I put it, that . . ." Mrs. Carteret was looking for something.

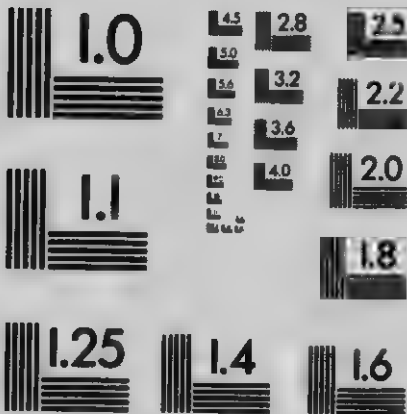
"Anything I can find?"

"I think not. It's a photograph Mr. Snaith lent Fred. I



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put it away to be safe. Oh, here it is!—with her name written underneath. Lucia Hinchliffe. It's her signature."

Nancy left the nose unfinished, and took the photograph in her hand. It seemed to disconcert her—to throw her out of gear. "Well!" she said, with *empressement*. "I only hope it isn't like her. That's all I can say."

"For Mr. Snaith's sake?"

"No—o—o—o!—quite the other way round. For her own sake. Fancy a girl like that throwing herself away on . . . Oh dear!—this sort of thing would have made one ask for smelling-salts if one had been one's great-grandmother. Now, do look at her, dear Mrs. Carteret!—and say if I'm not right."

"I see an oval face with large dark eyes and plenty of eyelash—hair on the forehead very pretty—separate threads. Lips a little apart as if they were waiting for an answer. Hands and throat very pretty, as though they would show blue veins in the reality. But it may be all the photographer's doing. At the same time it may not. Suppose we give her the benefit of the doubt. We shall see on Sunday."

"Perhaps she won't be half as pretty. I devoutly hope not." And Nancy remained with her own candid hazel eyes fixed on the dark ones in the fascinating photograph, till Mrs. Carteret applied for it, saying she must put it away safe because it didn't belong to her.

When Nancy got home to her sister, she mentioned that she had seen a portrait of the Miss Hinchliffe Mr. Snaith was engaged to, whom they were to meet on Sunday. But she gave no details.

Sunday came, and the Miss Hinchliffe Mr. Snaith was engaged to drove him over, or was driven over with him, in her mother's brougham, to Maida Vale. Remington the coachman was told he would not be wanted again, and touched his hat. Miss Hinchliffe's desire was that she and Mr. Snaith should be free lances, and it was complied with, metaphorically. Free lances in those days took hansoms and always had change to pay the fare. Nowadays they whistle for motors—which don't come—or are the cause of whistling in others.

The two young ladies from Gipsy Hill bicycled up to the house just after Remington had touched his hat, and just before Lipscombe opened the garden gate. The dachshund, believing the carriage had called for *him*, rushed out and established himself on the back seat before the door could be shut, and had to be extracted and apologized for. It was the guilelessness of his dis-

position, and he was shown to have bitten no one for a very long time; quite a geological period.

Mrs. Carteret was able to interleave an almost momentary interview with Nancy into her phases of satisfaction at welcoming Mr. Snaith and his *fiancée* into her house. It was nevertheless long enough to communicate that no news had come, no light had been thrown on her brother-in-law's disappearance, and —what should have been a comforting consideration, but seemed the reverse—that Fred had gone to Scotland Yard to lay the case before the Authorities, and that no doubt that was what had made him late. It was a formidable and oppressive fact that seemed to leave no further room for evasion of the main issue; no chance of not looking the ugly realities in the face. Mrs. Carteret showed Nancy how completely upset she had been by this step towards a public recognition of them, and how thin her pretexts of confidence had been in a satisfactory explanation of the mystery. Still, she kept her uneasiness in abeyance before her visitors, and showed a fine discipline. Indeed, of the two, Nancy seemed the more perturbed. And this being visible to her sister, a rapid *sotto-voce* communication of Fred's mission resulted, and produced in her also an appearance of disquiet. But everyone pretended successfully that nothing particular was the matter.

Naturally, this pretence involved a specious assumption of general joyousness—of reciprocities in universal congratulation on Heaven-knows-what-felicities afloat in Space. That is merely the common form of Society's demeanour until some of its members have been individualised down into the *bêtes-noires* of others. This little company was all smiles, as due. Even when the hostess, hearing an entry at the garden gate, said she thought that must be Fred, and went out to meet him, no one took any notice of a sudden tension in her face, unless it were Nancy.

That young lady heard the fag-end of the mother's interview with her son as she came upstairs. She said:—"Then we must wait and hope to hear more." And he replied:—"That's about what it comes to. They'll do their best." Then the exigencies of visitors to lunch banished the subject, to remain in abeyance till the coast should be clear again.

"You've been introduced, I suppose," said Fred to the *fiancées*, conjointly. Oh dear yes!—they had indeed. And a species of gush testified to the triumphant thoroughness of the introduction, and its success. This implies nothing artificial in the character of either. It was merely the demeanour in such a

case made and provided by the Canon Law of Society. No more than that!

"How do I like her?" said Mrs. Carteret to her son, that evening. "Charles Snaith's young lady. How *do* I like her?" She laid the case seriously before her judicial faculties, and seemed to await the coming of some witness whose subpoena had been delayed.

Fred assumed an apologetic tone; quite suddenly, without apparent reason. "I had to be very attentive," he said, "because of Charley."

"Oh, I quite understand," said his mother. A sub-smile that was indeterminate upon her lips wavered a moment. Then decided on expansion. "It didn't seem . . . exactly a sickening job"—she said.

"Oh, not the least—not the least!" said her son. "Why should it? In fact, I liked her. Yes, I decidedly liked her!" He hung fire a little before adding:—"Cintra *doesn't*. I suppose you saw *that*."

"Oh yes—I saw!" Mrs. Carteret's manner may have meant that her son need not suppose she did not see things. However, she crossed Cintra off, and went to another item. "Only I must say that that dear girl, my particular friend . . ."

"Elb—Nancy?"

"Yes—Nancy. Not Elbows! Oh, I know the ridiculous name you boys thought fit to call her by. . . . Well—she was very . . ."

"Very what?"

Mrs. Carteret reflected, gravely, handsomely. "Well—suppose I say half-and-half, about this Lucy girl! Yes—Nancy was half-and-half. What a very dear girl she is!"

"Oh yes—Nancy's all right. Very fond of Nancy. So *she* didn't take to . . ."

"To . . .?" Was his mother bent on making him say the name? If so, why?"

"To Miss Hinchliffe?"

"Were you not to call her Lucy? I thought it was decided."

Fred answered with an uneasy half-laugh:—"It hasn't been publicly discussed, you know. *She knows* nothing about it."

"Oh, I've no doubt it's all right. Now tell me what Mr. Snaith's partner said." Her interest in the new *fiancée* had been only skin-deep.

"Trymer? Trymer said we had only negative evidence to look to, so far." Fred reported this as if it was a substantial

contribution to the solution of the question under discussion. But he added that Mr. Trymer had emphatically welcomed an appeal to Scotland Yard. "So I went straight there, and saw the boss."

"And what did he say?"

"He was consolatory, as far as he went."

"And how far did he go?"

"Well—it was *something*. He said that cases of the sort were simply innumerable, and that only one in a thousand didn't fall through. He meant that when the people turned up, the case lost its interest—for Scotland Yard. Then he said there was *very* seldom a case where it wasn't a woman somehow."

Mrs. Carteret smiled coldly:—"And when a woman disappears, isn't it a man?" She was always on the lookout to give the same sauce to geese and ganders. However, it was beside the mark at present. "There is no woman in this case," said she. "I suppose you gave him every particular?"

"Absolutely everything. And we shall hear at once if they get any clue. He was against advertisement—at least for the present. If the person advertised for wanted to keep out of the way, an advertisement of his appearance would only show him what he was *not* to look like. I told him that my uncle's wanting to keep out of the way was absurd."

"What did he say?"

"He said everyone said that, in every case of an unaccountable disappearance. He told me queer stories of disappearances." Fred went on to repeat some of these.

His mother listened to one or two, and then said:—"But there is no resemblance in any of these cases. That man who dressed up as a woman was not over six feet high and weighing twenty stone. Absurd!" She thought, however, that this official's conviction that Dr. Carteret had never gone to Wimbledon had some value, because he was absolutely unable to assign any reason for it. All opinions the holder cannot account for should be listened to, she said, and all logical deductions—of experts, at any rate—systematically discountenanced. Fred felt bound to protest against these views, as weak and feminine; but he had underdoubts of whether there was not something to be said for them.

"Which sort of way shall we go now?" said Mr. Snaith to Miss Lucia Hinchliffe when they had watched the two young lady bicyclists out of sight, and said farewell to Fred at the gate

of his mother's residence. He seemed a little anxious to get back to her.

"Any way you like. I don't care. Don't you think one place is exactly like another?"

"Can't say I do." Mr. Snaith's beaming smile as he gazed on his beautiful companion was a set-off to the eyeglass he saw her through, and the nose that was so obnoxious to Miss Nancy Fraser.

"Well—settle any place you like. I'll go." But when a speaker expresses complete subservience to your will, she should not at the same moment stop a yawn behind the fingers of a straw-coloured glove, size No. 6. Complaisance should be recognised by its recipient. The little account of its executant should not be presented for cash across invoice.

"I say, Lucy, you're getting bored. Can't stand that! Never do—never do!" This most amiable of lovers spoke in a tone of real alarm.

The young lady thought it incumbent on her to relent. She smiled as from a zenith. "Suppose we were to go to—to—Hampstead Heath?" said she. "Like a Sunday out, don't you know? I think I should like that."

"By George, what a ripping idea! Hampstead Heath. Only I can't see any hansom. . . . No—we won't take that one. It's not our sort. We must walk to the stand." They did so, and the discountenanced driver of the wrong sort of vehicle lurched by, with a new thorn in a misanthropic heart. "He saw us mean to, and change our minds" was a thought that flitted through them, and found its way to the young lady's lips. "How he hates us!" said she.

The air that day thought spring was coming in earnest, but hesitated over saying so. They reached a cabstand that consisted of two cabs of the right sort, one driver, one waterman, four tubs, and an iron post that yielded water to possessors of its secret.

"How long shall we be getting to Hampstead Heath?" His meaning being obvious, Mr. Snaith's simplicity expected a direct answer.

But the London cabman is—or was—an inscrutable being. It was impossible to be even with him. This one said merely:—"Walkin'?" and waited for an answer.

Mr. Snaith re-framed his question so as to exclude ambiguity. The cabman referred to an authority—the waterman. "How long do you make it, Heverett, to drive *this* here lady and gentle-

man to Hampstead?" indicating them as a cargo whose weight had to be considered. The waterman, alive to responsibility, replied:—"That's accordin' to the road you take, Samuel. You go round by Bermondsey, you won't git up there not afore dark. You leave your horse alone, and he'll git you there in twenty minutes." This seemed satisfactory, and the lady and gentleman reached the Lower Heath in about that time.

"Who is Uncle Drury, and why are they making such a fuss about him?" Thus the young lady, with a languid interest, after learning without any at all that that was Harrow, and the horizon was in Hertfordshire.

"Are they making a fuss about him?" asked the young gentleman, discreetly.

"Yes—at least, no one said anything to me about it. But I could see there *was* a fuss. What is it?"

Discretion dictated professional reserve. "Well—I suppose I may mention it to *you*. Only don't say anything to anyone. I know they would rather not have it talked about. . . ."

"Oh, don't tell me, if it's a secret. I hate prying into other people's affairs."

Nevertheless Mr. Snaith, thinking he detected in his adored one's voice a trace of readiness to be offended with a lover who did not share all his confidences with the chosen of his heart, considered it safest to do so in this instance. "I expect it's all a false alarm," said he. "But, for all that, the old boy hasn't been seen for three weeks past, and he went off to go straight to his school—he's a headmaster of a big school in the West of England—where his presence on the first day of the term was of vital importance, and he never arrived."

"Never arrived!" Miss Hinchliffe's languor became vivid interest suddenly. Her dark eyes, somewhat bored before, flamed with a very becoming animation. "Why—he may have been murdered!"

"*May* have been. Anything *may* have been. Only one doesn't rush to the conclusion that a man has been murdered without strong evidence."

"That sounds true and prosy. But what *has* become of this old gentleman?" She waited for an answer, and spoke again before her companion could concoct one. "Was he, perhaps, the sort of old person that one isn't sure one couldn't do without him? . . . That's not right—I mean I've got the words wrong. . . ." She ran through the words again, and ended:—"I see. Leave 'him' out and it's all right."

"Oh ah!—that's prose composition, isn't it? I'm not a dab." Mr. Snaith polished his eyeglass to see the young lady clearer, and repeated her words. "'The sort of old person that one isn't sure one couldn't do without!' Sounds all right! Well—I'm not sure that he was the sort of person one was sure one *could* do without. Can't fill out the order better than that at present."

"You said 'was.'"

"Well—suppose I did?"

"That means you think he's been murdered!"

"Come!—I say! Draw it mild."

"I wish you would tell me what you really think."

Now, this young solicitor, although sorely exercised in mind about the disappearance of his friend's relation, was encouraging professional exercises on the subject, and throwing wet blankets over spontaneous ignitions of common sense. He had been fostering that curious condition of mind to which we are all reduced if we burn our fingers with percentages. Was it not clear—did not a work on Crime and its Detection tell him so?—that a very minute percentage of Disappearances could be traced to Murder, and only a slightly larger one to Suicides; about the same to sudden mental affections, loss of memory and so forth; but a huge slice to the spontaneous volition of the absentee, who turns up in the best of health and spirits some weeks or months later, at which time another absentee, of the opposite sex, is usually accounted for. This overwhelming percentage was a vast comfort to him. And though the reputation of the Rev. Drury Carteret was unassailable, it was to be noted that the more unsullied the reputation, the more necessary would dematerialisation—as good a word as another—be, if the unblemished repute felt its proprietor's natural lawlessness was growing too strong for it.

Therefore Mr. Snaith, thus adjured by the Mistress of his Soul, was rather at a loss to say what he really thought. He assumed a judicial aspect—which is one we all assume when we mean not to come to the point—and looked so solemn over it that she may have really believed he was going to say something.

"I think," said he, "that this is a well-marked instance of a case that calls for suspension of opinion."

"Oh," said the young lady, very succinctly. And she said nothing else.

Her lover seemed dissatisfied. "Well?" said he interrogatively.

"I want to know what your opinion is. Suspend it by all means, but say what it is."

"That's a rum way of looking at it. However, of course I can tell you my idea."

"That's right. Tell me your idea."

"Dr. Carteret met a friend in the train . . . No—not a lady! . . . going to Southampton. Some very old friend he hadn't seen for years. Then he missed his station to change at, and thought he might just as well go on, and see his friend off. Then he went on board the tender, and didn't get off in time. Then the tender left him on the ship. Then his only chance was to come away with the pilot."

"And why didn't he?"

"Did you ever see the pilot get off a ship into his boat, off The Needles, in a strong sou'wester, such as we were having three weeks since? If you ever have, you'll know why he didn't, without telling."

"Then you think he's been carried away to Cape Town, or somewhere?"

"To Madeira. He might have to wait a week for a return boat. That and another week for the journey makes him three weeks away. That brings him to now, accidents apart."

"Stop a minute, Mr. Claverness. You've forgotten something. Why didn't he write, or telegraph, to say where he was?" Mr. Snaith had to invent reasons, lame enough but not absurd, to meet both objections. Feeling their insecurity, he tried for another topic. How did his *fiancée* like the young lady of his friend's choice? Oh—she was all very well. Very nice and all that. But wasn't she rather . . .?"

"Rather what?"

"Well—I suppose it isn't fair to say commonplace. No—not commonplace exactly! But considering what an interesting man she's going to marry, isn't she just a little—*young-ladylike*?"

Mr. Snaith's generous heart—for he had one—was hurt that his friend's lady-love was not meeting with appreciation. Even his keen sympathy with the panegyric of his friend did not console him for this cold douche on his sanguine anticipations of the result of this introduction. He had looked forward to seeing these two girls rush into one another's arms. And here was his, saying that Fred's was "not commonplace exactly." He broke into an extravagant eulogium of Cintra—extravagant considering what his knowledge of her amounted to—representing her as consisting almost entirely of intrinsic virtues without

external manifestation. It was impossible to overestimate their value.

"Oh," said Miss Lucy Hinchliffe.

"We ought never to let ourselves be deceived by appearances."

"Oughtn't we? I always do."

"Don't believe you!"

"Very well—don't! . . . Now, if it had been the other girl . . ."

"Elbows?"

"What do you call her? . . . Oh—Elbows! But why Elbows?"

Mr. Snaith was not prepared to stand an examination on this subject. He backed out. "Only a name we call her by! Just a name!" said he.

"You did not call it her without some reason. What was your reason?"

"A—well—I don't know that we had any reason in particular. . . . P'r'aps because she left an impression of elbows!"

"On whom?"

"On both of us. A mental impression, I mean."

"So I understood. But what I want to know is why didn't Fred Carteret propose to . . . to Elbows?" She accepted the name without laughing over it.

"Ridiculous idea!" And Mr. Snaith evidently thought it so. Why should such a really brilliant and promising fellow as his friend throw himself away on a—on a—well!—on a dowdy? "A girl with no looks to speak of—the sort of girl I should call a chap more than a girl. . . ."

"Are chaps dowdies?" A question asked very coldly.

Mr. Snaith relented, not feeling secure. "No—really—I don't mean to say Elbows is a bad fellow. But you must admit that she's not the sort of girl a man wants to marry."

"Why does your friend want to marry the insipid sister?"

"I say, you're incurable. Oughtn't we to be on the move? It's going to begin to get dark." And thereupon this pair of lovers started to return home, having all but fallen out over what was really the rearrangement of other people's affairs, suggested by the one who had the lesser right of the two to interfere with them.

The story, feeling inclined to know something of what the young ladies under discussion thought about the newly made acquaintance who had formed such decisive opinions of them,

will follow the bicyclists, and overhear as much as it can of their conversation.

"Well!—what do you think?" This was Cintra, coming alongside of her sister, who was given to sudden printing, and had shot ahead. "Don't rush on so. I want to talk."

Nancy slows down. "About which?" says she.

"About which whats?"

"Which of the things?"

"You know what I mean perfectly well."

"No, I don't."

"Well—if you *will* have it, about that detestable girl!"

"I thought you might mean the disappearance."

"The disappearance? Oh yes, the old schoolmaster uncle!"

Cintra does him the honour of a moment's consideration, before disposing of him. "No—he'll be all right, you'll see. You know Fred's and Charley Snaith's idea?"

"I don't know any of Mr. Snaith's ideas, and what's more I don't want to."

"Well then! Fred's idea without Mr. Snaith. Do you want to know it, or not to?"

"To." This monosyllable—perhaps the shortest answer of which the language is capable—produces a *résumé* of the Madeira theory with which the story is already familiar. It only elicits another monosyllable from its hearer—the one usually written "H'm!" Which, however, has no meaning, or may mean anything.

"I don't see the use," Cintra says, "of pretending to be a Sphinx. . . . What *do you* think though, Nancy dear?"

"Oh, I don't know. How should I? I've hardly so much as spoken to the old gentleman. He may be the sort that gets carried away on ships to Madeira, for anything I know. What's the other thing?"

"Why—that odious girl, of course. What should it be?" Then both these young women feel that they have reached the theme of their duet; having only, so far, dealt with the prelude.

The first phrase is in Nancy's part, and is emphasised. "She's fascinatingly beautiful, anyhow. You *must* admit that, Cit."

"Oh dear! I didn't think so at all!" Cintra is chilling. "Of a commonplace type perhaps. How exactly like you, dear!"

"What's exactly like me? Her?"

"No, thank Heaven! I mean discovering beauties."

"I should have thought she didn't want much discovering. You ask Fred what *he* thinks!"

"I shall do nothing of the sort." Cintra's own comeliness, which is not of an uncommonplace type, is enhanced by the animation with which this is spoken. Indeed, she flushes slightly over it. There is no doubt that she is rightly considered the family beauty. Why is there always one among English sisters who fills the post? She adds after a moment:—"Fred is not likely to be taken with every insipid chit."

Says Nancy:—"Men are, sometimes." Then after reflection:—"But this chit's bespoke." For the loyalty and order of Nancy's soul do not admit vagaries on Cupid's part in reputable modern life; where no man ever covets his neighbour's wife or sweetheart, any more than his ox or his ass.

And Cintra, this chapter supposes, may have cancelled such a thought in its birth, as one cancels the poisonous fly as he inserts his proboscis—usually ten seconds too late. But there was some undercurrent discomfort in her thought, to judge by the tone in which she began to say:—"It's all very well for you, Nance, but . . ." and stopped short.

"What's all very well for me?"

"You won't have to live in the same house."

"Why do you speak as if it was settled? She hasn't even *seen* the house. Besides, after all, it wouldn't *be* the same house. It would be next door."

"Well—you won't have to live next door. You know you won't."

"I don't see why *you* any more than *me*. You've only got to know your own mind. Tell Fred you won't live next door to Mrs. Nosey, to please him or anyone."

"Couldn't I put it on something else? Suppose I was to say it had been a madhouse, and I didn't like madhouses?"

"Just as you please. I should say—tell him the truth! Only, remember you've only just seen her. How do you know you won't think her ducky in a week?"

Cintra flashes out. "The idea! I know—I tell you I know—I shall always detest her." Her bicycle wavers in a rut, and she has to negotiate it out. She does not forget her indignation when she gets straight again, but adds a corollary to it. "An artificial minx, if ever there was one!"

Says her sister, unmoved to sympathy:—"The artificial minx is sweetly pretty, anyhow. The most appealing eyes I ever saw in my life!"

"Appealing eyes indeed! Oh yes—one knows the sort. . . .
But we shan't agree, dear, so we'd better not talk about it."
Her laugh, as she says this, is just a little strained. However,
Nancy only says:—"Perhaps we hadn't," and the subject drops.

Mention has been made of Miss Fraser's habit of passionate
admiration of her own sex, so her estimate of the beauty of
the artificial minx may have been exaggerated.

CHAPTER VIII

THE authorities at Scotland Yard communicated in due course with Mr. Frederic Carteret. And due course was a week or more. During that week Fred sounded every depth in the ocean of his ingenuity, until it resembled the best investigated of seas in the most recent of Admiralty charts, to find fishing grounds for new theories to account for his uncle's absence, and keep despair at bay in the mind of his mother. His draughts of fish were unsatisfactory, mere littlebats and minnows—theories that would not bear handling. And then came an emissary from the Yard, to report progress, or the absence of progress; half an hour's conversation with whom went far to dash the hopes that every day without news was already making smaller. No doubt this well-meaning official believed that his exhortations to Fred not to lose heart had some efficacy against despair, however little. But their effect was really depressing.

Every means of tracing the missing man—so he said—had been taken, regardless of expense; except indeed advertisement in the Press, which often did as much harm as good in the early stages of an enquiry. He had himself twice visited The Cedars, the house where the Rev. Dr. Carteret had been last visible to the eyes of Recollection, and had endeavoured to induce that Divinity, or Principle, who has as many eyes as Argus for whatever she chooses to look for, to open one or two of her closed ones on the landscape of the Past, growing dimmer day by day. But her eyesight, if her only agents on the spot were to be trusted, could detect nothing of the old boy of a satisfactory nature, since Mrs. Grewbeer left him, conversing with himself, to answer the gate-bell, and had her attention effectually diverted from him by the plight of her old husband.

"I expect," said Fred that same evening to his friend Charley, conversing with him at his chambers shortly after the departure of the police-officer, "I expect this chap—Manton's his name—has scared those two brozy old Grewbeers out of their five wits. . . . What do you think he went and said to them?"

"Give it up!"

"Clean out of their five wits—if they have five! He told them they would be held accountable."

"What for?"

"I don't exactly know. Of course it was only to frighten them and make them tell . . . whatever they had to tell. I don't see how they could know anything more than they have told. Unless they are liars. They may be, like the boy—the costermonger's boy. Manton saw him."

"What did he say?"

"Said he saw nothing of my uncle—stuck to his story. I was going to tell you about Manton."

"Go ahead!"

"He trotted those two old gaffers over the house—made them show him everything, down to the cellars. He regularly made my flesh creep"—here Fred wriggled uneasily—"by describing how he looked behind the coals in the cellar. And how he went over the garden, and examined every inch of the ground, to see if any of it had been disturbed. But he saw nothing. Of course not!"

"Thought your uncle had been murdered for his valuables, I suppose. Well—such things have been. Empty houses have a bad name. I expect Mr. Manton was very much put out at finding nothing."

"I thought he did seem a little disgusted. But with Fate—Providence. Not with my uncle. He made every allowance for the views of the proposed victim. Still, he could not conceal his professional disappointment. The same when he told me of the search along both sides of the railway line, with dogs. 'We shall go over the ground again,' he said, 'though I can't say I've any hope in that quarter.' I found myself getting quite grieved on his account, and tried to hold out hopes of—of success—in some new untried quarter."

"Then he must be hoping your uncle is alive, if he despairs of finding him dead."

"Well—yes! Or fearing he is alive. Of course our interests differ."

In talking to his friend at this time Fred kept up a *fauz air* of confidence that nothing "could have happened" to his uncle, by an affectation of cold blood in discussing the possibility of his having been murdered. One would have thought, to hear him chatting over it with his friend, that they were hardened cynics, and that the vanished man was a special object of their indifference. With his mother, Fred cast aside this mask of assumed callousness, and showed his real self.

Under the circumstances, and in view of the visible anxiety that

was constantly wearing at her heart and depressing her spirits, he made a point of spending his evenings with her, and doing the best that was in him to stave off despair of his uncle's reappearance, alive and well. But the task grew harder and harder.

Her greeting to him on the day after his interview with the emissary from Scotland Yard was what it had come to be, evening after evening, whenever he appeared at Maida Vale. She only looked into his face steadily, with a tension on her own that spoke of the waiting for news of which this was the climax; and said interrogatively:—"Well?"

He had learned that it was best to damp all hope first; and then to bring forward what he had to tell, if anything, that would revive it. So his first answer was to shrug his shoulders and shake his head, and make the word "nothing" with his lips. Then, when a stifled sigh had made its record of her disappointment, he brought forward his alleviation, for what it was worth. "However, I have seen the man from Scotland Yard. He called this afternoon."

"Oh—and what did he say?" The expectation of a new possibility was in her voice.

"It didn't come to much. But it does seem as if we might put aside any idea of—of anything—between the time of his leaving The Cedars and his arrival, or what should have been his arrival, at the school that evening."

Mrs. Carteret reworded his speech more clearly, and did not flinch from its real meaning. "That is to say, we may feel sure he was not murdered on the way home. How can they tell that?" Fred gave the particulars already given, and she added:—"Well—that is *something*, at any rate!"

Fred felt he need not tone down this much encouragement. "My own belief," said he, "is that everything points to the miscarriage of some explanatory letter—one that would have cleared up everything, and told us where he is now. Probably he would write to Mrs. Thingummy at the school—not to us. I can imagine a hundred *contretemps* that might make him change his plan."

"I can't." Mrs. Carteret spoke with a quiet decision, and Fred, on reflection, was obliged to admit to himself that the *contretemps* he could imagine were less than a hundred. The worst of it was that the probability of every expedient of this sort diminished by leaps and bounds, and the time was at hand when baffled Invention would have to throw up the sponge.

Fred's mother was not always so self-contained—so secretive

about the degree of her apprehension. This evening she interrupted his reading aloud of some interesting adventures in Thibet, to say:—"I can't listen—my head goes . . . But wait a little." He waited, and took note of an aimless wandering in her hands, that seemed to come at times and would not let them rest. "I can't help it," she said presently. "I know I exaggerate. But think what the possibilities are! All last night I was imagining horrors."

Fred saw his way to a form of solace which has its recommendations as a means of soothing other folks' fears, however well grounded. "My dear Mother," said he, "if we were always to be thinking what horrors are *possible*, only people with very strong nerves would remain sane. Or perhaps with no imagination at all."

"I wish I had no imagination at all."

Fred persevered. "Do just consider," said he, "how exceptional this case is. We may almost be said to know, for certain, exactly when—where it would have happened if . . ."

"If he had been murdered. Say it out! That is what you meant?"

"Well, I suppose I did. Anyhow, knowing this, we know too that after the closest examination by experts . . ."

"Aren't they the people that make the mistakes?"

Fred took no notice, but continued:—"Not the smallest trace of any kind has been found to justify such a suspicion. It is not as if we could not identify every spot of ground he must have stood on between The Cedars and the school-gate." He paused a moment, to accumulate weight for his next decision, then continued:—"I consider it as good as proved that—that no harm came to him in the train. So does Charley."

"Because the police-officers had dogs, I suppose. Dogs are so convincing, somehow. I like dogs." Fred was conscious that he too had felt heartened up when he heard of the dogs, although he was quite uninformed, either way, as to their efficacy in such a case made and provided. But he had a suspicion that his mother was alive to the fact of his juniority, and was indeed nettled at her confounded female shrewdness—a quality resembling "instinct" in animals, and quite inferior to human reason, an attribute essentially male. Also, his mother did not seem to him quite alive enough to the efficiency of Scotland Yard.

To impress her with this, he dwelt upon the thoroughness of the officer's search through the old house near Wimbledon. She

seemed unimpressed, and even disposed to call some points of it in question. "Did your—Mr. Manton was it?—turn the coal over? You said 'looked behind it.'" But she saved Fred from having to confess that he had never asked to know, by adding:—"It doesn't matter. Two old caretakers would only have coal by the hundredweight." So he got away to another topic.

"By-the-bye," said he, as though it had just occurred to him, "he says—Manton does—it would be as well to word the advertisement at once . . ."

"Go on. Why do you stop?"

"Why did you say 'oh dear!'" For his mother had uttered this exclamation, sharp on the word 'advertisement.'

"I knew it was coming."

What occurred to Fred as reasonable to say was:—"Then why *did* you say 'Oh dear!'" But he did not say it. He went on with his main theme. "As well to word the advertisement at once, to have it ready in case it should be decided to use it," said he.

"Oh—then he still thinks it *may* not be wanted?"

"Oh dear yes! This is only what the doctors call prophylactic."

"I see. What does your police friend suggest?"

"Just the usual thing. Missing from his home So-and-so, since such a date. Then full particulars of his age, dress, general appearance and so forth, with a word or two as to special habits, if any. He recommends that nothing should be said about the manner of his disappearance. If we send all particulars, he says *they* will word the advertisement, and see to its insertion. We need know nothing about it."

"I should prefer to see how it is worded."

"Very well. Their suggestion was only to spare needless . . ."

"Needless pain to friends and relations. I understand." It was noticeable that Fred often flinched from the position while she faced it. But his cowardice was on her behalf, more than his own.

"They have nearly everything already," said he. "I took them all the photographs I could find at the first go-off. There may be others."

"He was not very fond of being photographed. Rather the other way. I don't think it is any use writing for more. I wrote to Mrs. Copen to send any she had, and she sent a more recent one—a very good snapshot, taken by the daughter of one

of the masters. I forget her name." Mrs. Carteret left her chair by the fireplace to find it, and brought it from a drawer in her writing-desk. "I don't think I told you. It's like, isn't it?" said she, and sat down again as before.

Fred could not take that photograph so calmly.

"Very good—very good indeed!" said he; but uneasily, as the thought crossed his mind:—"What and where is he now, who was then accepted monarch of all these boys?" For the picture showed some *nêlée*, unexplained, with the headmaster in the midst; descending on a culprit, to all seeming. "Do you know what it was?" Fred asked.

"He caught two boys fighting, Mrs. Orpen said in her letter. She did not say how this Miss—whatever her name was—came to be there. But there she was, and there's the snapshot. Yes—I think it particularly good." She spoke with perfect equanimity, as though nothing unusual were afoot.

So much so that Fred thought the moment a good one for touching a point he had fought shy of, without analysing his reasons. "There is one thing I promised to write about," said he. "Uncle Dru's exact age. What . . . is it?" The cause of his wavering over these last two words was unfortunately clear. He had all but said:—"What was it?" Then, having nearly made the mistake, he was far too transparent to show no consciousness of having done so. He was a very transparent young man, was Fred.

His mother's "never mind!" had no logical place in the conversation, but each knew the other's thought. She did not mean that the age was of no importance—only that we need not pick and choose words in face of the facts.

"It would be better to have the exact age," he said. "If we have anything to go by. If not, they say the age he looks would be the best. I told Manton sixty-one or sixty-two."

"He was more than that," said she, and he noticed the past tense of her verb. "He was twelve years your father's senior, and your father would be over fifty now."

He had risen from his chair and was walking about the room—it may be that wrong tense needed a change to slur it over—and the way that she reversed his corrected form of speech stopped him. He felt he must rebel against this assumption of—or acquiescence in—his uncle's death.

"Mother! For God's sake don't—don't!"

"Don't what? . . . But I know. Why should I pretend not to know? You mean, why do I believe him dead?"

"Well—yes! Why do you? Why should you?"

"Is it not enough that for thirty years he has always been in his place on the first day of term? He was proud of it—spoke of it to me that last time, the very last time I saw him. Not only since his headmastership—fifteen years ago that was—but the whole time, since he became Latin master. Is not that enough—at least to make one fear . . . ?"

"Fear—yes! But to jump to a *certainly*—no!"

She did not quarrel with his overstatement of her position, only saying:—"It is hard to tell fear from certainty sometimes—fear *enough*! Perhaps I am cowardly. I hope so." Then, as he said nothing, she continued:—"Do what I will, I cannot remember a word he has ever said—about friends, I mean—to warrant your idea of the intercepting passenger on the rail. If such a person had existed—a person who could influence his return to the school at such a time—he must have mentioned him, to you or to me."

"Or her." He was only speaking of a supplemental possibility.

But she had a tired smile for this possible *her*, as too great an absurdity. "I wish I could think it was . . . that kind of thing," said she. "But—your uncle!"

"I didn't mean that."

"You might have. Age is nothing."

"I know age is nothing. But I was not thinking of that kind of thing at all. My idea was some old friend he hadn't met for years. It need not have been the boat. You know that idea. I told you?"

"Oh dear yes, *I* know. But it's *impossible*—that's all I can say. You see he was talking, that Saturday afternoon, of the absolute necessity for being in his place on Monday. *You* did not hear him. *I did*."

Fred felt that speculation only made matters worse. It never bore the light of day. But he would have given a world, had he possessed one, to see the strain of anxiety pass from his mother's face. Changing the subject to something quite different struck him as out of place—probably also impossible. The nightmare of uncertainty, in its worst form, had possession of them; and timid remedies were worse than none. He could not sit still and say nothing, yet he could only speak of his uncle. What did this leave him, now that nothing was to be hoped for from new surmises about the mystery? What was it safe to talk about?

Something crossed his mind—a question he had often thought

to ask his mother, but never ventured on. He could see no reason why he should not do so, now. He threw out an initial:—"I wonder why . . ." and stopped short.

"You wonder why what, Fred dear?"

"I wonder why Uncle Dru never married."

"Are you sure he never did?"

Fred started. "I thought everyone knew he never did," said he. "But *did* he?"

"I don't know." This answer, quietly given, with perfect self-command, took Fred very much aback. His mother continued:—"You needn't look so dumbfounded. Remember that your uncle was quite old enough to be a widower when your father's family came to live next door to us. I got to know them over the wall. But I was the merest child then—a chit under thirteen. However, I don't believe it was then, but later. Only I knew nothing about it." She paused a little, and then said suddenly:—"Only remember—I can't answer for it that he was ever married. Or never. I can't answer for anything either way. I don't know." Here Fred said:—"Oh, I see," and something in his tone made her reply rather short and decisive. "No—I'm not sure that you do. It was a love-affair."

Fred hastened to disclaim any intention of suggesting that he had inferred an irregularity, and his mother let the point pass. But an irregularity would have accounted for silence and oblivion a generation later, and there seemed no reason for veiling a blameless passion that had ended in frustration somehow or other. So Fred's curiosity was roused, and after one or two not very successful attempts to get at this love-affair that might or might not have ended in a marriage, he asked his mother point-blank what his father's version of the story had been. He *must* have known all about it.

"I never spoke a single word to him on the subject," was the reply. But she showed her consciousness that this answer might be incredible. "Better ask why, Fred. You know you mean why," said she after a pause.

"Yes—I mean why," said he. "But I should not have said it, because . . ."

"Because you didn't want to say your mother told stories. Good boy!" He had suspended an uncertain walk about the room, and was leaning on her chair back. She turned round and kissed him, for approval or forgiveness; then resumed:—"But I'll tell you why. There was a good reason—an exceptional

one. *My mother, who told me, made me promise not to speak of it to a living soul. You were not born or thought of when she told me. So you don't count.*"

"She may have meant *any* living soul present or future."

"She may have. I know what *I* meant when I made the promise. Anyhow, I see no reason for not telling you, now. What can it matter, when he . . . ?" She left this unfinished, but Fred knew her meaning. "I saw it was your father she was thinking of, and I kept my promise. For I never said a word to him about it, nor he to me. I doubt if he ever knew."

"You haven't told me exactly what grandmamma said. Perhaps you would rather not?"

"I cannot see why I should not. I feel so very sure the prohibition applied to your father." But she seemed still in doubt whether she might break her promise.

He felt he could not help to a decision, either way. So, not to sit silent, he said:—"Grandmamma and Uncle Dru were very great friends?"

"Yes—he told her everything. That is how he came to take her into his confidence about this . . . I think I may tell you."

"Yes—but not if you . . ."

"I think I may. It is all to his credit. He fell desperately in love with a very young girl, and thought he was bound to wait till she was old enough—for him to speak, I mean. In the meanwhile she naturally got herself appropriated by some other man, who wasn't so scrupulous. Knowing your uncle as I did, I am not the least surprised at his taking his disappointment so bitterly to heart. Some men are like that, and they are the best men. But it's a pity."

Fred embraced the opportunity of showing his wide knowledge of Man and Woman, and the ways of those strange creatures. "Not by any means an uncommon case!" he said, nodding sagaciously.

His mother pursued the theme. "One thing did surprise me though—that he took no warning from what was going on under his very eyes. Surely your dear father and I were young enough—couple of young monkeys!—when *we* began. No—age has nothing to do with it. Nothing whatever!"

Fred could not associate ideas of youth and romance, dawning passions, jealousies, reconciliations, and so forth, with those prosaic things people's parents; especially his own. The story believes this frame of mind to be not infrequent in youth. It

had its share in causing this young man to abstain from comment.

"Nothing whatever!" his mother repeated, after a pause. "This must all have taken place in the first year of my acquaintance with your father. At least, your grandmamma said nothing of the exact time, but I had the impression it was about then. He did not tell her—so she said—till some time after we were married. I cannot imagine why she was so anxious I should tell your father nothing about it. But she was so very emphatic that I actually did as she wished, and held my tongue. It wasn't easy."

"No, by George!" said Fred; but seriously, for the circumstances were against trivial speech. "Didn't she—or perhaps she did and you wouldn't like to tell me—tell you who the girl was?"

Mrs. Carteret shook her head. "She refused to. Said it was absolutely out of the question that I should know. She wouldn't say why. But of course there may have been many reasons." Many indeed, and the most incredible one of all more credible than the true reason! Never had the mind of a woman been more unsuspicious, or through a longer term, than that of this unsuspecting lady.

And indeed her son was just as unsuspicious of the truth as she. So much so that his mind, restlessly on the alert to discover causes of his uncle's disappearance, jumped at this incident of thirty-odd years ago, and connected the two things together. What his mother had just said was so true—that age was *nothing*. If he could only find out who that girl was!

"Mother!" said he, abruptly.

"Yes—my dear!"

"Have you no guess who she was? I have a reason for asking."

"What is your reason for asking?" She spoke sedately, with something of fatigue. But were not the clock-hands near on midnight?

"She might have something to do with it—this girl."

"With what?"

"With Uncle Dru's disappearance."

"What nonsense!"

"No—don't say that. Think it over. How old would she be now . . . ? Within a year or so will do."

Mrs. Carteret thought. "Between forty-five and fifty, somewhere," said she.

"Well—that would do! Then, suppose her husband has died suddenly!"

"You can't work it that way. She is a widow—if she is living—has been a widow for years. I can tell you that much."

"How do you know?"

"My mother said so the last time we spoke of it. I remember her saying so distinctly. Mamma has been dead seven years. Yes—let me see! Your father has been dead eleven years, and it was in the time between. I recollect thinking to myself:—'Now here is a chance for a little happiness!' I said so to her, or something like it."

"And what did she say?"

"I was trying to think. . . . No—she said nothing except that it was absolutely impossible. I think I tried then—yes, I did—to get from her who she was. I had some crazy idea that if I could only get at her, even then, I might do something to bring it about. But she would say nothing, except that it was quite out of the question, and I had better give up the idea. I cannot understand how she could be so positive on the point. But she was."

"No—that's a puzzler. How could grandmamma know?" Fred racked his brains in the pause which followed, and could think of only one solution. "The widow must have got herself fixed up with some other man. That's the only way out."

"No—it wasn't that. I can't say why exactly. I put it down to something your uncle had said to her—something about his own feelings. You see, she knew him so much better than I did. So much better than anyone!"

Fred would not give it up. "Suppose Uncle Dru's ideas had changed!" said he.

"After all these years! Why not when her husband died, if at all?"

Fred could not utilise his uncle's individualities, strong as they were, beyond a certain limit. The time was too long. But he had not run through all his possibilities. "Suppose the lady's ideas had changed?" he said. "I mean, suppose she stuck out at first, and gave in in the end?"

"That might be," said his mother. But the way she yawned showed that this new theory had very little weight with her.

It hung about Fred's mind, nevertheless.

And the next morning, at breakfast in his friend's chambers, he broached it as promising, if not one to lean heavily on. Certainly not a broken reed—he would go that far!

Mr. Snaith seemed impressed, but could not shut his eyes to the number of improbabilities we had to swallow in order to make this theory wash. Perhaps had he been talking to one of his partners he would have mixed his metaphors less. But Fred didn't matter! We had to suppose, he said, either that Dr. Carteret's fidelity to his first love had had a very intermittent character, or that her own has shown a miraculous stability. He was not going to pretend that instances were not common—indeed, we heard of cases every day—of widows who kept the memory of their late lamenteds alive to the end of their own lease of life. What seemed to him so unlikely was that if it lived for twelve or fifteen years of this period it should not last out the rest of it. He altogether scouted the idea that Dr. Carteret would keep silence—his expression was “bottle up”—all that time. The reasonable course for him would have been to postpone his suit no longer than was due to the bare requirements of respect for the departed.

Fred quite acquiesced in this, but “pointed out” that although his grandmother, their only informant, knew that this lady had lost her husband, there was nothing to show that she had not married again, and lost her second husband recently. To account for anything so contrary to experience as the disappearance of his uncle, we were driven to improbable suppositions; not to impossible ones, he admitted. One of the least improbable seemed to him to be that which connected this disappearance somehow with this romance of his uncle's early life. Details might stand over. The young man seemed rather relieved to let them do so.

His friend seemed only half convinced. “What does your young woman think about it?” said he.

“I haven't seen her.”

“Poor beggar! Of course seeing her means a railway journey. I see mine every day, pretty nearly. P'raps I'm tempting Providence.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well—every day is coming it rather strong, isn't it? *She* don't say so, you know. At least, only in jest of course. I know when she's in jest, and when she's in earnest.” In spite of which knowledge, he seemed to think a word of confirmation not misplaced:—“I know she's in earnest this time by the way she talks about you and Miss Fraser. Of course she talks more freely by hooking it on to third parties.”

Fred showed an aroused interest. "What does she say about me and Citrus?" said he.

"Well—about this very matter of being so far off. I was telling her what a devil of a distance off you were, and she really seemed to think it a worse job than I did, myself. Quite took it to heart, don't you know?"

"What did she say?" Very much interested indeed, was Frederic.

"I don't suppose Cit cries her eyes out about my not being there every five minutes. Anyhow, I'm due there on Sunday. Just lately, I've made a point of being with my mother a good deal . . . you understand? One must."

Mr. Snaith hastened to show appreciation of his friend's filial devotion. *He* saw, old fellow,—of course, of course!

"Besides, the fact is . . ." Fred glanced at a door no human creature could possibly have come in at, to express exclusion of the outer world from a solemn confidence. "The fact is . . . only you quite understand, Charley, I wouldn't say this to anyone but you . . ."

"I'm mum." Mr. Snaith touched lips closed for the purpose with a resolute forefinger.

"Well, the fact is, that at The Jessamines—that's the name of the Professor's house, you know—the family is rather heavily in evidence."

"I understand." Mr. Snaith commiserates his friend. "Like to have her rather more to yourself."

"Ye-es!—that sort of thing. I must confess, Charley, to thinking you a lucky beggar. Only one solitary maternal parent to keep at bay!"

Charley seems to make some mental reservation. "She's—she's an awfully capacious one," he says, rather ruefully.

Fred is not disposed to make allowances. "I would sooner have any amount of capacious mothers than a little snippy sweetly stepmother, always ailing. That's what she is—always ailing. And as if that wasn't enough, she's unselfish and considerate."

"Knits you comforters. I know."

"Exactly. Then there's her cub, who has been promised to be allowed to sit on your knee—as likely as not. Then there's an older cub, a school-cub, whose aunt gave him a watch, and he immediately took it to pieces and put it together again."

"That doesn't hurt you."

"It wouldn't, if he didn't want me to make it go. He thinks—in fact Cit does, and they all do—that an engineer ought to be able to make watches go. I can't. And the Devil himself couldn't make this one go."

"What sort of chap's the Professor?"

"I don't half dislike the Professor. Only I wish when he sees me he wouldn't always say:—'Well, Mr. Frederic, any new patents?'"

"What harm does that do you?"

"Well-l-l! Doesn't it rather seem to imply that I'm throwing away money on patents?"

"It might bear that interpretation."

Fred got away from the subject. "Then of course there's Elbows. Candidly, Charley, I shouldn't be able to stand Elbows, if my mother wasn't so fond of her. I really shouldn't. I should strike."

"So should I, mother or no! Beast of a girl!"

"You see, what's so irritating about Elbows is that with so many people—my mother's only one instance—she passes for a nice girl. And when people are like that it's perfectly useless to reason with them."

"Perfectly." Mr. Charley was qualifying a small morning cigar for its mission in life, which made his speech brief. As soon as he had lighted it and was convinced it would draw, he appeared to feel that he ought to make up for lost time, and contribute to the conversation. He began:—"What a mar notices, about a girl . . ." and was arrested by the fact that he had not thought of what he was going to say.

Fred guessed. "Way she does her hair?" A *sotto-voce* interjection, as though he knew perfectly well what was coming.

But he guessed wrong. For his friend shook his head with the air of the best authority, and corrected him. "Wasn't going to say that," said he. "I was going to say that what a man notices about a girl is her attitude. Particularly about chaps. See what I mean?"

Fred said he did, but he didn't. A remark he made, to the effect that they—girls, to wit—were very sharp, did not seem to satisfy his hearer, who proceeded to elucidation. "When I say *attitude*," he said, "I refer to the sort of thing which—the sort of thing which is perhaps best described by indicating Miss Fraser's as a case in point."

"I should let it go at that, Charley, if I was you," said Fred. "You see, whenever I go to The Jessamines I have to be civil

to Elbows, who really is—who really is—exactly like what you say. As to my mother, it's a clear case of infatuation. That's what it is—just simple infatuation. But women are always the worst judges of women. . . . Let me see—what were we talking about?"

This could only refer to the last topic but one. Mr. Snaith located it. "Your last theory about your uncle. I asked what your young woman thought. It's important to know what the women think about things of this sort. Rather their line."

"I shall see her on Sunday. Meanwhile . . . Well, of course you won't talk about it?"

"Oh no—you can rely on me. But . . ."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You were going to say something?"

"No, I wasn't . . . at least—it certainly did just cross my mind. Would you particularly object to my mentioning it to Lucy? In the strictest confidence, you know." Fred looked doubtful. "You've no idea what a—what an instinctive shrewdness she has about things of this sort! A kind of insight. It's quite phenomenal. . . . However, not if you don't like!" For the uncertainty lingered on Fred's face.

Was a phenomenal insight into "things of this sort," by a young lady he had only seen twice, a sufficient reason for taking her into the inner sanctum of a chapter of private family history which his mother had kept silence about for years? Surely not, said common sense and experience. Fred took exception to their decision, on the grounds that the young lady had a slim but well-rounded figure, expressive black eyes, and a faultless set of pearly teeth. Not that he admitted that he was under the influence of these items of her total. They were merely present to his imagination when he decided that he might rely on his friend's judgment, and his guarantee of strict confidence. After all, he would have to take someone into his confidence. Were the detectives of Scotland Yard alone worthy of admission into its precincts?

He hesitated where hesitation makes a change of mind impossible. The slightest wavering, once interpreted into concession, may not be harked back upon. Fred made matters worse by suggesting conditions. "You'll take care of that. . . . Miss Hinchliffe thoroughly understands that it isn't to be mentioned to a living soul. You are sure she's to be trusted?"

"Oh dear yes—she's Secrecy itself. As safe as the Lord

Chancellor." Would Fred have felt reassured by this if it had not been for those qualifications the story has just inventoried—those eyes and teeth and so forth? Probably not. Fred was much readier to credit this young lady with every virtue her lover chose to vouch for, than—for instance—his own *fiancée* would have been.

Indeed, when Fred came to think it out, he saw that it would be almost impossible not to talk over this new way of accounting for the mystery to Cintra, and very difficult to keep her objectionable sister from the knowledge of it.

His mother had seen the desirability of a reserved statement of the new suspicion to the official investigators, and Charley had recommended a full one. So Fred's clear course was to seek out Mr. Manton at Scotland Yard and put him in possession of the facts. He did so, and was not a little disgusted to find that the facts, all told, amounted to so very little. All that had made his last solution of the mystery seem so plausible when his imagination was free to run riot among mere possibilities, became thin and vanished when he was face to face with the task of wording a written memorandum of it for official use. He was reminded of the way in which some of his mechanical inventions had shown their weak points when put to the test of a full specification. What had he to tell, after all, that added anything to the facts already in possession of the detectives? Nothing but that his mother knew that his uncle had been in love with a girl early in life, and had apparently never contemplated marriage later; that this young lady had married, had become a widow, and might or might not have married again. It amounted to nothing. We did not know—did not even suspect—who the lady was. If we had known, and had found on enquiry that she too had disappeared at about the same time, there might have been reason for connecting the two things together. As it was, in Mr. Manton's opinion, Mrs. Carteret's information about her brother-in-law's early love-affair left us exactly where we were before.

"I must mention to you, Mr. Carteret," said the detective, when he had made a note of all that Fred had to tell, except a good many of that young man's inferences, "that in my own opinion the old advice to look for the woman at the bottom of any mischief . . ."

"I know," said Fred, "*Cherchez la femme!*"

"I believe that is the French for it," said Manton, not without commiseration for a race condemned to the use of such a

language. He picked up his last sentence:—" . . . At the bottom of any mischief. Well—it doesn't hold good."

"Doesn't hold good?"

"Not in this case, at any rate. Consider the motives of the parties concerned. Here we have your uncle, an old gentleman of absolutely unblemished reputation. . . ."

"Absolutely!"

"Clerk in holy orders—that sort of thing—and at the head of an establishment that would be simply ruined, perhaps permanently, by the very smallest slur upon his moral character. . . ."

"Quite an impossibility! Thing couldn't be."

"Right you are, Sir. But how about his motive for secrecy, if there was nothing to conceal?" Mr. Manton made a marginal note with a pencil on an open paper before him, as if he had some time to spare before Fred answered.

He had, for it was quite fifteen seconds by the clock-tick before that young man said:—"I see. Concealment would do him double the harm of publicity, in any case one can imagine." But Fred would not give it up altogether. Might there not be some reason on the lady's side, he suggested.

"To conceal what? A marriage? I think you'll find that idea won't bear handling, Mr. Carteret."

Fred did, apparently. At least, he made no attempt to handle it. He produced the photograph his mother had given him, which interested Mr. Manton. He remarked that it was "a good job for the big 'un" that the headmaster happened to come by, insomuch as it was evident that "the little 'un was going to lick." Fred could not help thinking that the detective's interest in the case had flagged since the chances of a murder had been minimised.

However, he handed him such additional particulars for the advertisement as had arisen from his conversation with his mother, and went his way. He felt very *désœuvré* and purposeless as he sauntered up Whitehall. Justifiably so; for is any end looser than his who is brought to a standstill in a search for one who has vanished and left no clue? The fear was beginning to grow on him that a month hence—a year hence perhaps—would find this terrible search as fruitless as it had been hitherto. It seemed now as though the searchers would be reduced to the pitiful inactivity of waiting for something to turn up, with such consolation as was derivable from the consciousness of an advertisement at stated intervals.

A hideous thought struck him. The last insertion of that

advertisement *must* come. It could not go on for ever. Could any excuse for discontinuing it be found that would not also be a confession that the case was hopeless?

Returning restlessly to Maida Vale in preference to making a pretence of work at his chambers, he found there visitors: Mrs. Orpen, the matron of the now headmasterless school, and the second master, a pallid gentleman who looked as if he had been shut flat between boards, and been ill set up by a miracle which had not done itself justice. As for Mrs. Orpen, any widow of forty-odd is buxom, until the contrary is stated; and this need not be done, in her case. Neither need corpulence be ascribed to her. She was the very person you would have jumped at for a housekeeper, had she come to enquire about your place. Fred's mental note about her was that she was exactly like his recollections of her nine years ago when he said farewell to the school and schoolboyhood. To his dissatisfaction, she made this same remark about him before he had arranged a way of saying it to her without personality. He resented it as patronising, but was unable to protest. There is a flavour of Olympus in the *personnel* of all our schools, even its matrons, which no late-acquired maturity on our part can ignore. Fred felt helpless, and junior, in the presence of Mother Orpy Porpy, as she was called in his time, and would have felt more so if during the last year of his pupilage he had not been a sixth-form boy. That just saved his dignity.

On the other hand, nothing could exceed his contempt for the pallid gentleman, who had come in at the school since his time; taking the place of a truly great creature, who had accepted the headship of a collegiate institution, in Canada. Both were mathematicians, certainly, and both high wranglers. But the fact that old Skinner Street—the name by which Mr. Stillingfleet, the Canadian, had been known to the boys of Fred's day—was two places lower in the Tripos than this flat man, Threepwell, was as nothing against the fact that Fred had studied geometry and algebra under the auspices of the former. *That* is what had made him great in Fred's eyes, and that is what makes all the instructors of our own youth great in ours. They have instructed *Us*—or have failed in the attempt, as may be. Anyhow, Fred almost ignored Mr. Threepwell. To be sure, his upper front teeth stuck out like tusks, and that may have had something to do with it.

Fred came in on a conversation conducted in undertones. For the shadow of the cause of this visit hung heavy over it.

"Go on, please," said his mother to Mrs. Orpen, when his incoming had subsided. "Where you left off, you know. You were just saying he had spoken of coming back on the Saturday when he came up to town a week before."

"He did so. And he was most emphatic I should forward no letters after the last post on Thursday. Last Easter a letter was delayed till a late delivery on Saturday, and did not reach the Doctor till Monday afternoon. He was wishful to guard against such a thing happening again. His very last words to me were:—'Remember, Mrs. Orpen! Nothing after the last post on Thursday this time!'"

Could anything be more prohibitive of theories based on a supposition that the Doctor had changed his destination at the last moment? As though she were aware that such theories were afloat, Mrs. Orpen added:—"And besides, there was his letter to me on the Saturday saying to have a chop ready."

Mr. Threepwell had something to say, apparently, and in answer to Mrs. Orpen's: "Yes—read your letter," produced one, evidently in the Doctor's handwriting, and read the passage:—"I am sorry to be unable to get back earlier on Saturday, and must leave the arrangements to you.' That only refers to some small matters I wanted him to discuss with me. This is the important part . . . h'm—h'm:—'I have promised to look over a house my nephew wishes to take, and shall have no opportunity except on Saturday afternoon. It will make me late.'"

"Go on reading," said Mrs. Orpen. For the gentleman was folding up the letter to put it in his pocket.

"I doubt Dr. Carteret having intended that what follows should be read to . . . to his family."

"Now you *must* read it, having said that, or what will Mrs. Carteret and her son think?"

Both agreed to this, conjointly. And Mrs. Carteret observed that she was sure her brother-in-law would never have written anything about his family that he would not have said. "I assure you," said she, "that my poor brother was not in the habit of softening things to spare his hearers. He was always most plain-spoken. Pray read all he said about us." It was painfully noticeable that she alone spoke of the vanished man as if he *must* be dead; one quite passed away, though not to be forgotten. She had made up her mind, that was all.

"You have the right to decide this point, and it is not for me to dispute it." The flattened gentleman did not say these words, but his bowed acquiescence as good as said them. He

reopened the letter, and went on reading:—"Will make me late. Probably it is so much time wasted, as my nephew is an unstable youth, quite as likely to fall in love with a new sweet-heart as a new invention. But a promise is a promise, and I must go and see this place. However, you may rely on finding me at home the next day, if you do not object to talking business on Sundays.' You will observe," said Mr. Threepwell, who had read the passage he had wished to omit with an air of stony protest, to disclaim responsibility for it, "that Dr. Carteret makes a distinct appointment with me for Sunday." He waited for answer or comment—so Fred thought—exactly as he would have waited for a questioned boy to reply in a *viva-voce* examination. An incessant schoolmaster carries the marks of his daily employment about with him almost more than any other man.

Mrs. Carteret said in an undertone, for her son's ear only:—"You see how it is?" meaning that this letter almost put an end to speculations such as his had been. He, at odds with its reference to himself, asked:—"About my instability?" To which his mother rejoined:—"No, silly boy!" with a shade of impatience. Then no one spoke.

Mrs. Carteret broke the silence. "Do not let us have any false hopes," she said. "You need not wonder that I can bear to speak of the terrible truth. My brother-in-law is dead—yes, *murdered*. We shall all have to think so before long, and I have been convinced of it for weeks. It is a hideous thought and a dreadful word to say. But what do we gain by keeping our eyes shut; each of us pretending not to see, to keep up a false courage in others? Let us look the fact in the face, that there is no way but one of accounting for his disappearance." She spoke, to all seeming, with a perfect self-command, but her face had gone ashy white, and the hand on which Fred laid his own, in something of mute remonstrance, was cold.

He found his voice to exclaim:—"Mother—Mother—do not—do not . . .!" and lost it again with his speech unspoken.

"Yes, my boy! Do not what?"

"Do not give way to . . . I mean do not let yourself believe anything so horrible, without proof. Remember that we have not a particle of proof."

"What proof have we got of anything else?"

On an ordinary subject, and at any ordinary time, Fred would have been pat enough with the vernacular speech usage has bestowed on us. He would have told his mother this was "femi-

nine reasoning." As it was, his answer was approximately sane, under stress of the occasion. "None whatever, dearest Mother," said he. "But why form a belief at all, when we know nothing—absolutely *nothing*?"

Mrs. Carteret said quietly:—"Beliefs form themselves, if nothing comes to check them."

Mrs. Orpen had a vague sense that this lady's belief that her relative had been murdered was somehow impious; but, to do her justice, she made no attempt to substantiate this impression. There was, however, a sound of protest, as of one scandalised, in her voice; and a shade more colour in her face, as she said:—"Well—I shall go on hoping for one."

Mrs. Carteret's reply was:—"Thank you!" which sounded a little odd to her son. Probably it meant:—"I am grateful to others who keep hope alive. I can do nothing to that end myself."

He changed the conversation—made the school its topic. An old scholar always finds plenty of questions to ask about his school, and there was nothing to be gained by mere aimless speculations about the fate of the headmaster, especially in view of Mrs. Carteret's confession of despair. She remained silent, and the same hush and undertone continued to haunt the speech of the others, as though the depression of the cause of their meeting was too heavy to shake off. This was so marked that even when they discussed the snapshot of the Doctor descending on the fighting schoolboys, Fred did not dare to refer to the detective's comment upon it. The trenchant attitude of the minute pugilist, sparring up to a stupid boy half as big again as himself, was not a thing to discuss without a smile; and smiles, then and there, were things of the past or the future. The shadow of the terrible present was over all.

Can anyone, who has not experienced the anxiety occasioned by the unaccountable disappearance of a friend—even of one who has not been an object of vital solicitude—be fully alive to the pain and stress of life it occasions? Some who have had this experience, ending in discovery of a corpse long dead—in some cleft rock on a desert coast, or bleak moorland solitude, where it has lain unknown till almost past recognition—have spoken of this revelation of death as a gain, as a release from tension almost too great to be borne. The worst is for those who never know, who are doomed to a lifelong doubt. Death is a thing to be resigned about; for we have—have we not?—the consola-

tions of Religion? Or, should we say—of a choice of Religions, one apiece? We know—or if we don't we ought to—that the dead are in the hands of God, while we are still shifting for ourselves; "on our own," as speech goes nowadays. Or, if not that yet-a-while, that they are reposing beneath the sod, happily unconscious of the coming Resurrection, with its embarrassing redistributions of matter laid claim to by a throng of its former possessors. Or if not that either, that they are Re-incarnate, or have joined the Choir Invisible, or— Well, something satisfactory anyhow! But—the man who has vanished! What of him? Ask yourself—would you not rather know that he is dead?

Mrs. Carteret believed her brother-in-law dead. How she had acquired such a fixed idea, without a particle of evidence to go on either way, Heaven only knew! Probably she could scarcely be said to have known herself. It was no doubt that bias of the mind her own words had just now hinted at, the growth of belief on the line of least resistance. Fred, on the other hand, was fighting against this bias because he had made up his mind not to give up hope; and the sappers and miners of despair were getting—day by day, hour by hour,—nearer to the fortress he was refusing to surrender. His was really the more painful position of the two, subject of course to allowance for the difference between their relationship. The Doctor was, after all, only Fred's uncle. Think what an old memory he was to his mother—what a friend he had been to her from her girlhood onwards!

The visit of the matron and the edge-faced Mr. Threepwell came to an end, the necessity to catch a train being rather welcome than otherwise. Mrs. Carteret was white, depressed, and silent; leaving comment on her visitors to her son, if he chose to make it.

"Can't congratulate the school on its new second master," said he, feeling that any indifferent topic might relieve the tension of the position. He thought at first his mother was not going to answer.

But she did in the end, saying wearily:—"You don't like him? Why?"

"Chop-jawed idiot!" said Fred, using language rather at random. "Besides, he wants to build domiciles over half the playing field. He as good as said so. You heard him."

"I think he *did* say something about it." She spoke very absently, and was turning the leaves of a book, evidently without reading it.

"I wonder Uncle Dru should . . ." Fred stopped. Was he to say "should take" or "should have taken"? That was his choice.

"Should what?" She still spoke in the same absent manner.

Fred tried another way. "I wonder at Uncle Dru taking such a miserable idiot into his confidence."

"Did he take him into his confidence?"

"Well—you heard his letter."

"I was not listening very closely. Could you remember the words?"

"Not word for word. But the sense was—that he thought I might change my mind . . ."

"I don't think," his mother replied after a pause, "that your uncle looked upon it as more than a chance remark, that he might have made to anybody. It makes me think of something he once said to me, about young people's love-affairs and marriages."

"What was that?" Fred seemed vitally interested.

"Never believe in a marriage till you see the couple coming away from the altar."

"What did he mean by that?"

"Nothing but that there is many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip. We all think so, and say so. It is little more than a truism."

Had it not been for the terrible uncertainty whether he would ever hear his uncle's voice again, Fred's answer to this would have been an angry protest. As it was, he choked back a resentment he would probably not have felt had his confidence in his love for Cintra been wrought of oak and triple brass, and merely answered, with an uneasy laugh:—"I shall tell Cit he said that, when I see her on Sunday."

"Why not?" said his mother. And indeed there seemed no reason why two affianced lovers, strong in the certainty of an imperishable affection, should treat the academical cynicisms of an old bachelor as of any weight.

Mrs. Carteret seemed to accept this view of the question, only replying:—"Are you going there on Sunday? Then I shall not have you to lunch."

Fred's conscience glanced reproachfully at him. "Isn't there someone . . ." he began.

"Who would come and keep me company?" She completed his question for him. "No—I would sooner be alone. I cannot talk to outsiders about it. Never mind me! I shall do."

Fred didn't like this. "There's El . . . There's Miss Fraser," said he, changing the designation midway.

"I should like her. But it isn't fair."

"What isn't?"

"Well—bringing her into such a gloomy atmosphere."

"Oh—be blowed! She'll like it. You've no idea what nuts she is on you. Look here!—suppose I write a line to Citi, and say she's to come. She'll come, fast enough. Trust her!"

"She's a dear girl. Write—yes. But no ungraciousness, please, foolish son of mine! Say that it will be a real kindness to me."

"All right!—I'll say all the things." With which assurance Fred sat down and wrote a really loverlike note to Cintra, on his mettle perhaps after the recent conversation. In order, so to speak, to emphasise the thoroughness of their mutual confidence, he referred to his new theory about his uncle's possible revival of a very old love-affair, as being at the bottom of the unsolved mystery. How jolly it would be if it were only that! But Cintra must be very careful not to say a word about it. He added an effusive message from his mother to the elder sister, inviting her to lunch, and dwelling on the satisfaction it would be to him to think that she would not suffer by his desertion.

But neither of them referred to the confirmation their recent visitors had brought them, of the settled determination of the missing man to be in his place at the time appointed.

CHAPTER IX

THE JESSAMINES was looking its best, that fine Sunday morning in spring, when Fred Carteret rang its bell and was told by the servant that Miss Cintra was expecting him in the small parlour.

The Jessamines' best was always at a disadvantage, owing to the close competition—semi-detached in one case—of near neighbours with more or less similar ideals. Inniskillen hadn't got a crenellated turret, like The Jessamines; but it had an elm, which once stood in the fields and didn't know the meaning of the word "suburb," but had been spared by some woodman whose musical associates in youth it had sheltered, and had been built into the parapet of the front garden, whose ornate cast-iron railings longed for each other in vain, on either side of it. Lyndhurst hadn't got three laburnums like The Jessamines, nor a hedge of veronica which often flowered, nor sculpture above an arched gateway you rang at and put your card in the letter-box if nobody came—excuse style!—nor so many red geraniums all at once. But Lyndhurst had a puzzle-monkey, in which it took a proper pride. So that really none of the villas all down the row could afford to give themselves airs, if you came to that. The story has been led, by the momentary presence of the young lady who opened the gate to Fred, to embody some of her ways of looking at life and her surroundings.

It may go further, and note that when she said that Miss Cintra was expecting Mr. Carteret in the small parlour, a something of sympathy in her voice, as of one that had a young man herself, carried the implication that Miss Cintra was alone, and the small parlour to themselves. Fred could not resent this attitude of sympathy, but he scarcely welcomed it. He saw his position and its publicity, as it were, reflected in the twinkle on Annette's comely face, heard it in the gleeful satisfaction of her voice, in the honeyed tones that announced that he was Mr. Carteret, Miss; and felt that he could lend himself to any arrangement by which he and his *fiancée* could have their seventh Heaven of bliss to themselves, free from either the derision or sympathy of the outside world.

Cintra, visible and tangible, was an antidote to his morbid introvisions, which he felt at a loss to account for. Why should not his meeting with his love be replete with the joyousness of their old thoughtless happy time before this horrible nightmare was sprung upon them? For he laid it all to that. If the thought entered his mind that any other malign influence had crossed his love for Cintra, he simply felt exasperated with it and drove it out. He *knew* he was master of himself. Why—see! Could he not—calmly, mind you!—make comparison between this rounded face and mass of soft brown hair, these reasonable everyday eyes with nothing telling or dramatic about them, nor anything unusual in the way of lash and lid; and, “for instance”—mark that “for instance,” please!—any other girl’s face he had seen of late? He could, and could decide to love this round face better than that oval one; this sufficiency of brown hair better than that superfluity of black; these honest English eyes—his inner soul used both epithets—rather than the witchery of those dark orbs which owed so much to the veined lids and long soft lashes that shaded them. He even went so far as to decide that his lot, compared with his friend Charley’s, was enviable; much safer, at any rate. Was Charley, after all, safe to trust his heart in the keeping of a girl of that sort? He felt better, stronger in his own position, after a consciousness of solicitude for his friend’s welfare.

He managed all these thoughts—it is wonderful how quick thoughts can be managed!—during a first embrace of greeting which helped him to their conclusion quicker than any logic. A good long kiss carries more conviction to the soul than any logic that ever was chopped. It is the bumper of good liquor; and Ethics, Law, and Theology are the Justice, Judge, and Vicar. This lover and his lass were quite happy, for the moment, seated on the sofa in the little parlour at The Jessamines, slowing down to everyday life after the raptures of reunion following a week or so without an interview.

“Well, Fred darling!—and what’s your news? Good, I hope?” She waited, anxiously.

Fred shook his head, slowly at first, to express reluctance to tell it; then more quickly to accentuate its trustworthiness. “I’m afraid—bad!” said he. “No sign of him.” He ran through the events of the last few days—told what had been done, and what was still to do, exaggerating possibilities of hope in the latter.

“What a horrible thing!” said Cintra. She said it twice,

making more of the adjective the second time. It may be she had never till now grasped the full horror of the thing.

"What's a horrible thing?" said the Professor, coming in without ceremony. "Oh—it's our great inventor. What's the latest patent, Master Fred?" This was his invariable style, and Fred had to accept it with a cordial shake of the hand as a set-off. He continued, re-asking his first question with a very slight concession of manner, amounting to an admission that one of his daughters might actually utter a sane word:—"And what is the horrible thing—eh?"

"There seems to be no doubt . . ." Cintra was beginning, but Fred cut her short, with:—"We cannot get any news of my uncle—you know he has been missing? . . . Well, we have not had any news of him." This was in answer to a deprecatory:—"H'm—surely . . .!" from the Professor, who was looking serious.

A second report was necessary, which Fred went through patiently enough. The Professor listened, with an analytical countenance; checking off the progress of the narrative at stages, and twice calling out to a complaining noise outside:—"Yes—I'm coming!" It was the obnoxious stepmother, who was infesting the entrance-hall with a view of being taken for a short walk, while the sun was out, by her devoted better half. Terror crossed Fred's mind when she intruded meekly, just as he was winding up, lest he should have to tell it all over again; especially as the Professor said:—"Come in—you *must* hear this, my love!" But he was spared this by a curious astronomical fact, new to him but known to this excellent lady, that the sun would not stop out unless they went at once. This caused the Professor to fly, firing Parthian expressions of sympathy and concern at the news he had just heard. She herself came in to shake hands with Mr. Carteret, and to say meekly that she was afraid she could not stop to hear now, but she should see him at lunch. Then the street door closed on them, and the garden gate confirmed their departure, and Fred breathed free.

But only for a moment, for an instant later a large hairy dog stormed into the apartment, causing Cintra to say:—"Oh—you darling dog, they've left you behind," and to direct her lover to go out and open the garden gate and whistle for him and he would run out. This was avoided, because the brother, whose name was Eric, appeared suddenly from nowhere, saying sternly:—"Ajax is not to go out, because he's been washed and is not to get dirty again till he's dry. How-de-do! I say,

when two magnets won't stick together, is that because of the poles?" Fred explained that whatever happened in Science, it did not become the enquirer to repine, as it would probably turn out that it was governed by Law. Eric felt enlightened, and took Ajax away, by request.

Then peace reigned, and Fred and Cintra occupied the sofa, as before. There was a topic he wished to approach, not connected with the cloud that was keeping the day's dark for him; but it was a delicate topic, and he feared to burn his fingers with it—hoped in fact that Cintra would be the first to allude to it. Remember that they had not met since the luncheon at Maida Vale, which had been organised expressly to bring the two *fiancées* together! Cintra had written more than one letter since then—more than two—and yet had never made mention of the other bride-elect, except in the most general terms.

She nevertheless was keenly curious to know something of how this wife that was to be Fred's friend presented herself to him. For was not a scheme afoot for domiciling them, if not actually in the same house, at least as next-door neighbours? And that too neighbours in a single large house, arbitrarily split into two small ones. Fred would be sure to talk about her. He was bound to do so in the end. She was not bound to inaugurate that topic, so kept silence about this Miss Lucy Hinchliffe.

Perhaps it was anxiety to approach the dangerous ground that made Fred unresponsive to her first bars of their duet.

"You'll have to keep your eyes open, Fred dearest," said she, "with Steppy Weppy, or she'll be down on you with her Nicholls. Mind you don't give her a chance, or she'll take it!"

Fred knew that Steppy Weppy was a derisive name for the stepmother, but Nicholls was new to him. "With her *what*?" he asked.

"With her Nicholls. Her Emma C. Nicholls. She's a *clairvoyante*. Whenever Steppy Weppy goes up to town, she goes to see her."

"But what about her? How does she come in?"

"You foolish young man, don't you see that she'll want you to consult her about . . ."

"About Uncle Dru? Well, let her want! I won't consult any Miss Nicholls. She may consult her herself, if she likes."

"She'll trot her out at lunch. You see if she doesn't."

"How does she hit it off with your governor, about her Miss Nicholls?"

"They agree to differ. She says he's a hardened sceptic."

"What does he say?"

"Says he doesn't mind being called a sceptic, as long as he isn't spelt with a K, like in America."

"The Greeks would have spelt him with a K, and they knew something about their own language. I'm not sure Uncle Sam isn't right, for once."

"I don't see that it matters. Anyhow, papa flatly refuses to believe in Miss Nicholls till she tells him the number of a bank-note in a sealed envelope. He's to put it there, you know."

"Of course! I understand that."

"I tell papa that's no use at all. She's sure to be able to do that by conjuring."

"Most likely. These things are easy when you know how." Fred spoke with a tranquil conviction. Was he not giving expression to a creed that will outlive all other creeds, faith in the omnipotence of our Maskelynes and Cookes? Besides, he felt correct, as the words passed his lips. Moreover, his mind was harking back to a conversation elsewhere, in which this vexed question of *clairvoyance* had been discussed. Could he not refer to this conversation? Why hesitate? He was angry with himself for doing so—then indignant at his own anger. Why should hairs be split over so simple a matter? He could disperse such questionings by speaking boldly of it. But he had to admit to himself that there were obstacles, and he ended by the mistake of speaking timidly. "However, I must admit I was told some very curious things by . . . by a young lady I was talking to—a—the other day."

"Who was she?" Cintra drawled or lengthened this out, to express that, whoever she was, she was of less importance than the absence of a coal-scuttle, just noticed. She rang the bell for a domestic, producing Annette, who was told to tell Jane she had forgotten the coals. When Jane had subsided, Cintra harked back. Who was this young lady? She could pay attention to her now that all that coal-fussing was over.

Fred had half an idea of inventing another young lady to do instead of Miss Lucy Hinchliffe; for it was she whom his tongue faltered over. That was cowardice. Besides, Miss Hinchliffe would have to be brought up for discussion in the end. "The young lady?" he said, pretending he had forgotten her. "Oh—about the *clairvoyance*! Yes—that was Lucy Hinchliffe. She told me some very odd things—very odd things indeed!—hap-

pened to herself." He did not look round at Cintra as he spoke. If he had, he would have met suspicion in the two eyes that turned suddenly on him.

As it was, he only heard it in her voice. "And did you believe the very odd things?" said she drily.

"Why—did you think she looked like a liar?"

"I don't think anything about her."

Fred glanced up furtively. There was no doubt about it. The young lady's face was paler than when he looked last, and she was playing an uneasy tune with the fingers of her left hand on the sofa-cushion. She was looking at these fingers, not at him.

Now this appeared to him entirely unreasonable. After all, whatever impression Miss Hinchliffe had produced on him, it was known only to himself. Official knowledge of this shade of sentiment—which, by the way, he denied the existence of—was simply impossible. Not only did no such feeling exist, but he was absolutely certain he had never shown it. That describes the paradox of his mental attitude to a nicety.

"Cintra!" said he in a half-remonstrating tone—not a strong one. Then he didn't see his way, and said weakly:—"I say . . ." and stopped.

"What do you say, Fred?"

"I mean—you mustn't think, you know . . . You mustn't fancy . . ."

"I'm not fancying anything."

"Well—look at what you said!"

"What *did* I say?" This question was fraught with embarrassment to Fred, who on reflection was unable to remember that the girl had said anything at all.

He could not evade answering somehow, and nothing presented itself but a sudden candour. "I see you hate Lucy Hinchliffe," said he. "But—what for?"

"I never said I hated Miss Hinchliffe. I hardly know her. I only said that I didn't know anything about her."

"But you know what that meant!"

"What did it mean?"

Fred felt his position bettered. "It meant," said he, "that you have taken a perfectly unwarrantable dislike to this young lady, who really is—" here Fred assumed a man-of-the-world air, implying unlimited possibilities of critical admiration of Woman, quite free from the trammels of passion—"who really is a very superior young woman. I assure you, my dearest girl, that when

you come to know her you will be one of the first to acknowledge"

"Go on! Talk like a book."

"Perhaps I had better go!"

"Yes—go away to your Miss Lucy Hinchliffe." Cintra had risen from the sofa; and, leaving her lover sole occupant, was making a pretence of looking out of a window.

This was getting serious. Fred also rose, and stood wavering, with a consciousness on him of the door he had been told to go out at. He had not the slightest intention of availing himself of it, but he felt that it had been, so to speak, mooted, and that its white china handle was aggressively in evidence.

Now it happened, fortunately for the resolution of this discord, that the three-quarter back view of Miss Cintra Fraser was one of her strongest points. It laid stress upon the mass of warm sunny brown hair which as good as said:—"Thick as I am, I am tight-packed, and all real!" and the soft whiteness of the neck below it which had equally said:—"Kiss me!" since it was a baby's; and had added:—"Provided you are a near relative," since the owner became a person. It laid stress also on the rounded flow of a mere morning garment, that but the other day was nineteen and elevenpence-three-farthings, a bargain, in a plate glass den filled with motionless loveliness, sometimes ending in a point. There is room for a good-sized volume on the influence of skirts.

Anyhow, it had its way, this particular aspect of a too suspicious young lady, who to tell the truth was also wilful and rather spoiled. Her lover, instead of going away, as bidden, to his Miss Lucy Hinchliffe, approximated naturally to his registered *fiancée*, and got his arm round her waist without more than a shrinklet of protest on her part. "Cintra dearest," he murmured. "Do tell me what all the row is about!"

"Well—you know you hadn't any eyes for anybody else, all through lunch."

"Why—of course she's a jolly pretty girl, and all that sort of thing. But one has to be civil, you know, when . . . Well—consider!—it was her first visit at my mother's house, and she's going to marry Charley Snaith."

"Oh—it was *civility*. I see." Here a slight recrudescence of protest—spinal rigidity in revolt against the encircling arm, which tightened.

"Cintra!—what else could it be? Besides, you must remember this—that my mother had been very much upset by this

affair of my uncle, and I had only just told her what they said at Scotland Yard. I really was afraid she might not seem sweet enough to her visitor, and Miss Hinchliffe would feel a little—well!—not exactly *de trop*, don't you know! . . .”

Cintra helped him. “Not being made enough fuss over. I see.”

“Well—not exactly that. Nor exactly out in the cold. But you understand. I felt I was bound to be as agreeable as possible.”

“You did your best.” Cintra’s manner is chilly, and it is not clear that Fred’s last apology—which indeed he had thought of for the first time—had done him any service. The dissension might easily have recrudesced; but, as often happens, the fresh air brought in by an incoming third party helped to disperse it. Nancy, or Elbows, in her bicycle things, hurried abruptly into the room, to say good-bye. “I’m off to your mother’s,” said she to Fred. “I’m late.”

“She’ll wait for you, any time,” was his response. Then the bicyclist departed. But not immediately, for she put her head back into the room, to say:—“I hope you’re not quarrelling?”

“No—why should we be quarrelling?” Both spoke, fragmentarily.

“Because I didn’t hear you begin again. Good-bye!” And off she went, ringing her bell conscientiously along the road, and turning corners carefully.

Fred was in no humour for further words about Miss Lucy Hinchliffe, so he postponed reference to the great scheme of The Cedars, which he had been quite full of when he reached The Jessamines. Presumably, the couple “began again” where they had left off before Miss Hinchliffe came into their conversation; for when the second luncheon-bell rang they presented themselves in a temperate frame of mind, ready smoothed for Society, and accepting outsiders with rapture, however cordially they wished them somewhere else.

They may have felt that the outsiders were welcome, as that class of persons draws a veil over family ructions of every sort, and the violence thereof subsides before the veil is removed. Fred felt what one always feels, when one is told, where one is lunching out, that the So-and-so’s are coming, whom of course one knows, so there is no need to introduce. He felt that he wished it had been somebody else, newer and more interesting than the Munby Morings. Nevertheless that most respectable couple were good as come-betweens—really the end they served deserves a

word invented for it—and helped whatever was left of that lovers' tiff of the morning to become a thing of the past. Also, Mrs. Munby Moring, a very interesting person, would talk to Steppy Weppy about Psychical Research and keep her quiet. Besides, they were very well connected. These last advantages were mentioned by Cintra to Fred, to palliate the Munby Morings, whom he seemed to resent.

"Bother the Munby Morings!" said he, rudely. "Anyone else?" And then when he was told that Emily might come in, but she wasn't certain, he made a face expressive of exception taken to Emily. "I know you hate her," said Cintra, "but you'll have to put up with her this once."

Fred said:—"Then if you put me next her at lunch, she must be on my right, so that I may not see the mole." Cintra promised to attend to this, but only just in time. For Annette the parlour maid threw the door open all its width as if to admit a van, and said "Miss Skinner" with decision. Miss Skinner, who was also Emily, could have come through a door ajar, as far as width went.

She submitted the cheek that hadn't the mole to Cintra, for pecking; saying considerably:—"Don't kiss me in front, dear, or you'll catch my cold." Because she was an unselfish person, who always thought of others before herself.

"I was afraid you wouldn't be able to get away," said Cintra.

Then another knock proved to be the Munby Morings. The female one was ample, fully justifying the open door. But her hat, an ill-considered hat, of the sort that was likened to a pork-pie some years ago, was held to one side of her head like a limpet, or the cap of the military in days of yore. Now Miss Skinner's hat, being as it were her only chance for horizontal expansion, was a Gainsborough hat with a feather, like in a portrait. It is impossible to avoid reference to these hats, as they had come to lunch, and meant to remain on at table.

Mr. Munby Moring was a thin grey short-sighted man whose collars held his chin up. It did not do to speak to him suddenly, because then he lost his eyeglasses, and had to find them before he answered you. His name, over and above the two already given, was Octavius, and he was spoken of thus behind his back by friends, in recognition of its use by his wife. It was, however, no fault of hers that he had no convenient abbreviation. How could the wife of a Government official—that is what he was—speak of him as either Ocky or Tavy? And what other choice was there?

"So sorry!" said the Professor, coming in late; but anticipating his wife, who was later still. "Mrs. Fraser was unwilling to lose the sun . . . Oh no—no indeed!—we didn't hurry back. Indeed, the sun began going in. So we came in." The ninety millions of miles off, which popular Astronomy regards as a feather in the cap of Phœbus, were interposed between him and Gipsy Hill in vain. He was treated like any other neighbour. And yet Cintra's father was Professor of Applied Physics at his College.

A few moments of consciousness that lunch was lying in wait for its victims in an adjoining room—for at The Jessamines all the rooms but the breakfast-room were on a level—elapsed before the lady of the house appeared. Then everyone affected a delight that nothing in the circumstances accounted for, talked at the same time, didn't wait for anyone else to finish speaking, and laughed gaily without provocation. In short, it was like when there's company. Because there *was* company.

Fred, for his part, would have been much better pleased if there had been no company. He would have been well content to chat with the Professor alone about the nightmare that was haunting his life and his mother's; for he really thought his intended father-in-law a sensible man, though he disagreed with him generally about Dynamics and Physical Science. He was feeling about in the dark for someone of the everyday sensible type, with a good digestion and no nerve to speak of, to pooh-pooh his alarms and predict the sudden reappearance of his uncle in the best of health and spirits, greatly surprised that his letter explaining—for instance—his sudden departure for Nova Scotia had never reached the school or his family. His future father-in-law would have been just the man. And not only was he deprived of this possible anodyne, but he was destined to suffer at the hands of the company, or at least the male part of it.

For when the ladies had retired, that the gentlemen might smoke, Mr. Munby Moring, who had very soon cast aside the mask of hollow cheerfulness which one owes to Society, and devoted himself to eating too much, roused himself from a torpor which was due to Sunday joint, and said to Fred:—"Carteret. C.A.R.T.E.R.E.T. . . . That your name? Any relation to man in newspaper—*Daily Telegraph*, yes'dy morning—man disappeared. Headmaster big school out near Exeter? . . . Oh—beg pardon!—no idea! . . ." For Fred had replied that the subject of this newspaper notice, which he had not seen, was his uncle.

This was discomposing; but as the offender had the sense to make no serious attempts to extenuate his blunder, it was easy to pretend that it wasn't. Apologies would have been fatal. In fact, it would have been better not to add even:—"Beg pardon! Stoopid of me! Ought to have known." He had broken his molasses jug.

The Professor ignored it; walked round the spill, so to speak. "The Engine!" he exclaimed suddenly and irrelevantly. "How's the Non-Vibrating Duplex?" Then he proceeded to explain the principle, and Mr. Munby Moring was only too glad to pretend he understood him, to distract attention from the molasses.

"A . . . Oh yes! I understand," said that gentleman, when the Professor paused. "Vibration and Friction practically same thing! V'course, of course. Quite understand! Does Mr. Carteret great credit."

"I beg your pardon," said the Professor, anxious to clear his character. "I fear I am not making myself understood. Vibration and Friction can scarcely be considered *precisely* the same thing."

"A . . . yes! Which is which?" said Mr. Munby Moring. "Fraid not exactly a dab at these matters. Very interestin', though." But this was only to extenuate ignorance and make the conversation plausible. Fred was glad that modesty enjoined silence on his part.

"Friction," said the Professor, "is the resistance offered by the spontaneous adhesion of surfaces in contact. Vibration is the movement of the molecular structure of a solid body due to the elasticity of its particles."

"I say!" said the boy Eric, who had been at liberty to have more for lunch than anyone else, because it was his dinner.

"What do you say, 'Ric'?" said the Professor benevolently, as from Olympus.

"Is it the same in class and out of class?"

"Is what?"

"Is vibration?"

The Professor seemed alive to the necessity for caution in dealing with his son. "That depends," said he. "Depends on the preceptor. A certain latitude is permissible to definition when used for educational purposes. Now how does your master, Mr. . . . Mr. . . . What's-his-name . . .?"

"Old Scrumpy?"

"Well—Mr. Crump. How does he define vibration?"

"Says it's a property inherent in atmospheres thus Sound is attributable to the vibrations of atmospheric air and Light to the vibrations of æther." Master Eric said this sentence rather as if it had been one long word.

What Mr. Moring was going to say turned out to be:—"Must c'nfess—was under the impression vibration was a sort of jiggle. Comes from next door—gets in the furniture and things. Gets on your nerves. Mrs. Moring couldn't stand it when they set up a gas-engine at the Institution near us. Had to complain. Threatened 'em with my lawyer. That's the best course to p'soo when it's vibration. Just you threaten 'em with your lawyer. That'll shut 'em up!" It will be seen that Mr. Moring did not look on vibration as a Scientific Phenomenon, but as an indictable nuisance. He enlarged on the subject. "When it's music it's no use. There was a f'ler in our Department had bought his house and paid for it, and a girls' school took next door. Practisin'—practisin' all day—I assure you! Nothin' but practisin', practisin' scales. And he could do nothin'! . . . Oh yes!—he took 'em into Court, fast enough. But could *do* nothin'! Had to pay the costs himself. Now, if it had been vibration!"

"I say," said Eric, with the animated face of Science when it gets a certainty, "if old Scrumpy's right and the governor's wrong, it *was* vibration. Sound is attributable to the vibrations of atmospheric air and Light to those of æther."

"We had some of it in a bottle—stoppered bottle," said Mr. Moring. "Mrs. Moring always reminded of Browning by it. Can't say why—all correct, no doubt!" He looked resignedly at his cigar, and seemed to decide that the ash was not long enough yet.

"But I say," said Eric. "Look here! Isn't practising sound?" This was admitted. "Very well, then—there you are!" he added triumphantly. Clearly, if practising was sound, and sound was vibration, practising was vibration, and actionable.

The Professor, who had retired when Applied Law was introduced into Applied Science, was a higher mind looking down on mortals. "I am afraid," said he, sedately, "that an action would hardly lie. We are not sufficiently advanced in Science."

Eric's candid eyes looked attentively at his father, and perceived a fact. "Don't you believe the governor!" said he, chiefly to Fred. "He's only humbugging. I always know when the governor's humbugging by the look in his eye."

The governor laughed, as did his company. "Suppose now," said he to his son, "you were to go and make some valuable remarks on things in general in the drawing-room!"

"All right," said the youth, with perfect serenity. "I'll say you told me to." He left the room, and a sense of grownupness developed in it as he went along the passage whistling. Mr. Moring talked about the crying necessity for more appointments at higher salaries in his Department—the Supcrtax Department, was it? The story isn't sure. The Professor's attitude was one of welcoming a higher salary for all his friends, and deprecating a rise in everyone else's; this he called retrenchment. He then looked premonitorily at his watch, and said:—"You know my way, gentlemen? Always an experiment going! It is now three o'clock, and at seven minutes past I have to add a hundred and forty-three grammes of dinitro-methylate of toluol to a solution of potassic bichloride in . . . But I need not trouble you with details. I shall be back before you have finished your cigars." And he fled to attend to what his daughters spoke freely of as "papa's messes." For even the blessed Sabbath was no check upon the continuance of such complications as the one given, probably inaccurately, above.

The door had hardly closed on him when Mr. Munby Moring embarked on speech as if he had something to say. "Can't tell you how sorry I am, Mr. Carteret, for putting my foot in it as I did just now—awfully sorry." Fred of course made light of the blunder, and was thinking how oblivion could best be developed in the interest of Mr. Moring's conscience, when that gentleman continued remorsefully:—"Awfully sorry, I assure you. But—similar case! Thought I'd better tell you, because you might like to know."

"Eh—what's that?" said Fred, on the alert in a moment. "A case of disappearance, within your own knowledge?"

Mr. Moring disposed of his cigar-ash, now at a dangerous maximum, with the deliberation of a man who knows the value of what his tongue is keeping back, and said after a pause:—"My own father, Sir! Yes—he disappeared for two whole years, and reappeared just where he was last seen. But he could give no account of himself. None whatever!"

"But—bless my soul!" Fred exclaimed, taken aback. "What a very extraordinary story!"

"Yes—and perhaps the most extraordinary part of it is, that that is the whole of the story. We have never been a penny the

wiser. I mean by 'we,' his family—brothers, sisters, cousins, the whole kit."

"But—how extraordinary! . . . I, you mean to say . . . ?"

"I've really said all there is to say. I'll give you a few details, which I suppose belong. But they are not in any way essential. It was thirty-three years ago, in Rome. I was at college in England, at Oxford . . . Merton, I was. Got a letter from my mother, saying my father had vanished, and she was frantic. He had been seen last at a café in the Piazza di Spagna, sitting at a little marble table peacefully smoking. He was a sort of *habitué* there, well known to the waiters. He said to one of them:—" *Bisogna ritornare in casa. Son infreddato*. You know what that means?"

"I can go as far as that. He thought he had better go home. He was catching, or had caught cold. Go on!"

"The man turned his back to give a customer change, and when he turned round, my father's table was empty. No one saw him go. He never went home. And didn't appear again till two years after."

"And then knew nothing of what had happened! Well—that is a queer story! Then, you said, he reappeared in the same place?"

"In the same place, two years after. Another waiter—not the same man, a new one—saw him at the same table, but had not see him come in. He said:—" *Caffè nero, Signore?* " and my father said he had had his coffee. Then he said to this waiter exactly the words he had said to the other two years before:—" *Sono infreddato—bisogna andare in casa,* " and got up and went home. I was in London that time too—just got my appointment at our office. But my mother has often told me how the dogs barked when the bell jangled, and she said to my sister—Lady Storrar she is now:—" *What on earth is making Leone bark so?* " Of course the dog knew it was the *padrone* back again. They do, somehow."

Fred assented. "Wasn't it very rum for your mother?" he asked.

"Well—of course—when she'd had time to recollect."

"I don't understand."

"Why—just at first he was so like himself it quite took her in. Fact! Then he took hold of her dress, and said:—" *What's all this black for?* " Then my sister screamed and went off fainting! She's not strong."

"But it was such a *smasher*!" said Fred, feeling this fainting fit was excusable. "What happened then?"

"Well—you see—I wasn't there! Only, as I understand, it was the dooce's own delight to convince him what had happened. He didn't know he hadn't just come home two years ago. I don't know that he ever *was* properly convinced. But these are the facts."

"Your mother was like mine. *She* persists that my uncle *must* be dead—won't hear of his being alive."

"Without positive proof?"

"Oh—no proof at all, at present. The bare fact that he has not been seen for a month! I was not in favour of the advertisement, but I left it with Scotland Yard—police authorities, you know. No doubt they know best." Fred didn't seem quite happy about it though.

Mr. Moring seemed to be feeling about for something on his chin, but with his eyes on Fred, and a slightly puzzled wrinkle round them. It became more decisive as he closed his lips tight and apparently pounced on the something and held it.

"It wasn't an advertisement," said he. "A paragraph."

"Well now!—I wonder who the devil did that!" said Fred.

"Never can tell, when it's the Press," said Mr. Moring. "You may break your heart over trying to get two lines in that you want published. When you want to keep somethin' out, in it goes of its own accord. . . . However, don't you let your mother fret about this old gentleman. Tell her the story I've told you. I shouldn't have raked it up, only for the circumstances. We don't dare to talk of it, because it brings Societies down on us—people with an interest in Phenomena. They want to know whether my father drank. Anyhow, it's true! So don't you go and believe your uncle's dead, till you know it." At which point the Professor came back, and they went into the drawing-room to the ladies.

Fred felt grateful for any excuse for hoping, and dispersing the cloud upon his mind. He did not believe the story he had just heard—because it was impossible—but he made use of it as a jurymast, to rig up the sails of Hope on; and he meant to pretend he believed it, for his mother's sake. He even reconstructed the narrator a little in imagination, with a view to laying stress on his responsible character and obvious veracity. What did it matter how true or how false the story was, so long as it could be used to shake that obstinate impression of his mother's that his uncle was dead, and dead by foul play? He

put it by for the moment, as valueless, *per se*, with a comforting sense of how he would utilise it, in the near future, as an anodyne to his mother's anxiety.

He wished he could do the same with that other piece of information Mr. Moring had just given him, about the paragraph in the *Daily Telegraph*. He could not bring himself to believe that it had got into the newspaper of its own accord. For one thing, it could not write itself—there must have been some penny-a-liner at the bottom of *that*. It *might* be that Scotland Yard had chosen this course in preference to inserting the advertisement. But why act with such promptitude while deprecating immediate publicity, as Mr. Manton had done? Surely all the gossip and annoyance that might be occasioned by an advertisement would be as nothing to what would result from a paragraph, perhaps a conspicuous one, in the one or two pages of a widely circulated journal which its advertisements bury and conceal. For does not the public struggle madly to get at this pith and marrow of the daily Press, and fling aside the reams of misstatements about the qualities and advantages of motor-tyres, corsets, cigarettes, and so forth? May not insertion of a fact in the advertisement columns of a big newspaper be considered almost a sort of transitive way of keeping it secret; the intransitive way being the old-fashioned one of holding one's tongue about it? Anyhow, it seemed incredible that Manton should, without consulting him, resort to an expedient likely to displease relatives infinitely more than the simple official formula they had agreed upon. No!—some fool or busybody had done that. But who gave him or her the information? It was not likely to be anyone who had an interest in keeping the thing quiet, as for instance those connected with the school, Mrs. Orpen and the chop-jawed senior wrangler, for instance. Whom had he spoken or written to about it—Charley of course excepted—other than Cintra herself? He could think of *nobody*. Well—there *was*, certainly . . . ! However, his imagination did not mention her name; but her countenance—eyes, pearly teeth, and all—floated swiftly across the proscenium, and vanished easily. Because Charley, you see, had made himself responsible for *her*.

The Munby Morings had departed, and Fred was hoping that Miss Skinner would follow their example, when Cintra dropped an extinguisher over the flame of Hope. Emily had consented to stay, and was apparently going to stay in her hat. Cintra explained aside to Fred that he wasn't to get furious, because poor Emily got away so seldom. As it was, she would have to

tear home immediately after tea; and was it worth unpinning her hat, and all the plague of pinning it up again, just for such a little time? So Fred had to pretend he was delighted, and really he did it very well, considering.

Nevertheless he wished the Gainsborough hat, its feather and its wearer, hadn't stayed. And if they had gone home, he would have been able to go for a short walk with Cintra, or get a quiet talk with her about their future in some quiet corner. Anyhow, he would not have felt that he could retire and look for that paragraph in yesterday's *Daily Telegraph*, which he thought he identified on a side-table.

But it wasn't yesterday's, nor any day's *Daily Telegraph*; only some provincial paper that looked just like it. Whereupon Fred, being thrown off his guard by a question as to what paper he had expected it to be, said he had wanted to find something in yesterday's *Daily Telegraph*, but it didn't matter.

Now, unless you are sure there are no obliging people present, the fewer things you ask for the better. Make this a guiding rule of life! Fred should have recollected, before he admitted his wish to see yesterday's *Daily Telegraph*, what a very obliging person his *fiancée's* stepmother was. The moment she overheard it, she was seized with a feverish anxiety to gratify that wish. He continued to protest vainly that it didn't matter in the very least, that it was not of the slightest importance that he should ever see the paragraph he had wanted to hunt up, and finally—in a sort of despair—that he should account it on the whole to his advantage if he never saw another number of the *Daily Telegraph* at all. No representation of his own wishes and interests availed to head off the obliging disposition of his hostess, and even a well-meant attempt on Cintra's part to stem it was swept away by the torrent of the good lady's willingness to comply with the wishes of her guest.

"No, my dear Cintra, don't talk, but go into the back room and look in the ottoman near the window, and on the left-hand side you will find all the *Daily Telegraphs* for a fortnight." Cintra went to look, and Fred went to help. The speaker continued, plaintively, addressing Miss Skinner, who was watching viciously for an opportunity to be of use:—"I would go at once myself, only for my leg." She filled in the absence of the searcher with a brief account of her attitude towards the daily Press. "I never allow a newspaper less than a fortnight old to be destroyed in this house. Then and not before, they may have them for the kitchen. They are all kept, even the advertisements and the

City articles. Professor Fraser is Method Itself, and I need not say his wish is my law."

Fred kept his counsel about the paragraph he wanted to find in the *Daily Telegraph*, and was glad he had done so when he found it. For it was this:—"Mysterious Disappearance—Friends and admirers of the well-known and much-beloved headmaster of Vexton Stultifer School will be concerned to hear that fears are entertained for his personal safety. It appears that he has not been seen since the thirteenth of last month, the Saturday previous to the Monday on which that ancient and celebrated scholastic establishment reopened its doors after the Easter holiday. On the afternoon of that day he left the house of his sister-in-law, a widow lady residing at Maida Vale, intending to return to the school without delay, according to his invariable practice at the beginning of every term. It seems that he shared the objection so many religious persons, however liberal, still feel about Sunday travelling." Fred felt very indignant at this absurdity, knowing that his uncle's reason for wishing to return on the Saturday was that he might have the Sunday undisturbed for correspondence. He went on reading:—"However this may be, it is certain that he left Wimbledon station by the five p.m. for Exeter, having in the interim transacted some business in the neighbourhood, on account of which he had preferred to join his train at Wimbledon rather than to start as usual from Waterloo. It is practically certain that he did not arrive at Exeter, where he was personally known, and where his familiar and commanding figure could not possibly, in the opinion of the railway staff, have escaped observation. Conjectures are afoot that he may have been inveigled from the train between Wimbledon and Exeter, but these theories do not find favour with those who knew the resolute and shrewd character of the missing gentleman. On enquiry at Scotland Yard, our messenger found the police officials very reticent on the subject, but we understand that they are in possession of a clue, of which no doubt every advantage will be taken."

Fred had remained in the back drawing-room to read this, and Cintra had rejoined her friend in the front one. As he sat on the ottoman in the window reading the foregoing, his indignation at its impertinence did not prevent one of his ears hearing the Gainsborough hat's frequent reference to "him and her"—some extraneous him and her—in a narrative clearly full of dramatic interest, judged by Cintra's reception of it. He was conscious—or rather, convinced—that the reason her obliging

stepmother was silent was because she was leaning back in her armchair for barely three minutes with her eyes closed. It did her so much good that sometimes you would not have known her for the same person. Outside on the landing he could hear the Professor, returning from a second collision with dinitro-methylate of tuluol, or something equally disastrous, in a colloquy with his youngest son, whose loquacity was excessive. It was the sort of time when he was allowed down from the nursery, and on these occasions it was impossible to hear yourself speak for him. The story is availing itself of the methods of speech of its informants.

The stepmother woke with a start just as Fred was about to disturb Miss Skinner's narrative with an enquiry about that number of the *Daily Telegraph*. Oh dear—she had been asleep! Then she became aware that he was asking if the number was wanted, or might he cut something out of it? She was immediately seized with a desire to supply a tool for the purpose. Cintra must forthwith look in the side-drawer of her writing-table, and be very careful to pull only the right-hand knob, because the left one came out. There she would find, palpable to the naked eye, her pair of scissors with the real morocco leather on the handles. These might be used, only carefully, to cut out a paragraph from a newspaper, even the *Daily Telegraph*. Fred vainly endeavoured to evade these scissors, representing that his pocket-knife was especially suited for the cutting of paragraphs out of daily papers. Had the excellent lady been Atropos herself, and the loan of the accursed shears been in question, it would not have been more difficult to escape from them without giving offence. He was compelled not only to submit to the obligation, but to appreciate the boon; which was the more difficult because the red morocco handles were curly, the rings too small for his fingers, and the clip-screw loose. How he wished he had thrust the paper bodily in his pocket, and kept silence about it!

However, he made use of the scissors *à contre-cœur*, and had just got through his difficulties when the Professor entered, with his son on his shoulder, still conversing fluently and intelligently on several topics. His nursemaid's raiment was the one that engaged his attention at the moment.

"Marfer has holes in her stockings, and I putted my fum in ve big hole." This appeared to exhaust that portion of the subject. "O'ym royd'n on parpar like oy rode ve donkey when we wented to Lamsdick, and I wasn't frightened. Ve little durl was took off because she tried. I didn't tried, because I was a

big boy. Vere was swimps that kicked because they wasn't boiled. And there was a scrab wiv sisk legs and two sclaws." At this point these recollections of Ramsgate were interrupted by his detecting the scissors with the red morocco handles, on the writing-table. He showed decision. "I wants vose fidders!" he said. "Vere my marmar's, and oy wants 'em to cut elephants and geoses out of paper."

"Easy—easy—easy, young man!" said the Professor, endeavouring to moderate an eagerness to descend perilously upside down. "You shall have the scissors and cut out geese and elephants—only, *don't* be in a hurry! Whatever you do, do it gently. What, my love?"

His better half was intoning to herself passages from a kind of Litany of unobtrusiveness and humility:—"If I could be heard—but I cannot raise my voice. I know I shall not be listened to—so it is useless for me to speak," and so forth, as a means of getting possession of the rostrum. Having succeeded in this object, she enacted that persons of tender years should not be trusted with scissors, or other deadly weapons on which they might impale themselves. "But," she said, falling back on the Litany, "whatever I say, I know beforehand that no attention will be paid to it."

"Lord, my love," said the indulgent Professor. "I shall be close to him, and see that he doesn't cut himself. He shan't spoil your scissors. Besides,"—he added, as a motive of self-interest—"if he doesn't get them, he'll howl."

"I was not thinking of the scissors, though they belonged to my great-aunt Mary." This was said in a freezing tone, followed by a resigned one:—"But, whatever happens, I shall have done my best. He is *your* child, Professor Fraser." She spoke as though she were responsible for several families imputable to departed or divorced male parents. Meanwhile her established offspring had possessed himself of Aunt Mary's scissors, and was applying to Mr. Tarcrick—his name for Fred—for the concession of the newspaper from which he had just made a cutting. Fred considered—as he supposed the paper would hardly be wanted—that the safest course all round would be to take this precocious child upon his knee and cut him out an elephant.

The Professor was much interested in this concession of his intended son-in-law, who went up in his good opinion. He watched with satisfaction the evolution of a single elephant and hailed its image as a work of Art. He held it up against

the light. "Quite a splendid elephant!" he said. "Now, Conrad, if you're a good boy and your father's own son, you will thank Mr. Tarcrick cordially for all the trouble he has taken in your behalf. Elephants indeed!"

But Conrad's haughty spirit resented any idea of gratitude. An unholy expression of defiance and rebellion stole over his countenance. "I sarn't fank no peoples," he said, contumaciously.

"Very well," said his father. "Then you shan't have your elephant back." But Conrad simply traversed this statement, without emotion. "I sall," said he. Whereupon the Professor decided to fold up the elephant, and put him in his pocket.

Now, it chanced that on the line of the elephant's back, just where his howdah would have crossed it, was a portion of the name and date of the newspaper. And as the Professor was folding him somewhat slowly and ostentatiously, his eye was caught by it, and his fingers arrested. He exclaimed:—"But, my love, this is yesterday's paper! This—is—the paper, or I'm very much mistaken, containing that letter of Schreichlichreicher of Berlin about the employment of minute quantities of chloride of gold as a manure. I particularly wanted that letter kept."

His lady yielded herself a prey to despair. "I have so *many* things to think of," she wailed, collapsing.

"Well, well, my dear! I daresay I was impatient. But the mischief isn't done—isn't done. Schreichlichreicher's letter hasn't run away. . . . Oh no—I'm sure it was in this paper, yesterday morning." He went on to examine each column, to find it.

Fred picked up the elephant and overhauled his flanks, which were all servants seeking places on one side, and estates with shooting on the other. "There, there! There he is back again!" said he. "Spraddle out his legs and he'll walk!" This was to pacify Conrad. He then helped in the search, taking another sheet. The innocent prattle of Miss Skinner, with its slight flavour of the Sexes, reached him from the window-corner, where it was absorbing Cintra's attention.

"No, Cit dy'a! He never *did*. That's just where I blame him. He took *absolutely no notice* of her letter. She came to me naturally for advice; and, Cit dy'a, I do hope you will agree that what I said was wisest under the circumstances. . . . Oh yes, my dy'a, I spoke quite plainly, and I'm *sure* she understood. There could be no mistake. I said *we must have the landress girl's own statement*, before forming any opinion. . . . Oh yes

—I asked about her looks . . . well—the sort of girl that sort of man admires. *You* know. I don't think her being on the chorus at the Proscenium has anything to do with it. Besides, I am told that all the girls there have the *highest* character; curates' daughters, I believe! So I spoke plainly. 'You know, my dear,' I said to Apollonia, 'it all turns on whether the packet of soap was paid for, and how long it lasted. There can be no possible reason for keeping anything back. So I should just write and say so to his half-sister, and tell her to mind her own business.' Of course, *Cit dy'a*, I don't know *exactly* what she said, or how she said it. But the fact remains, that he has taken *absolutely no notice*. And as for the door having been left standing open, that remains *exactly* where it was. . . ."

And so on. Fred and the Professor finished their exploration in the *Daily Telegraph* about the same time, and each admitted his failure to the other with a shrug. "But," said the latter, "is it certain the letter isn't on the back of the piece you cut out?" Fred was nearly sure that was a law-report, something about the salvage of a ship. He had looked to see. The Professor referred to the gap of excision, and found confirmation. Possibly, a long ship case! "Very funny!" said he. "I must have mistaken the day. Friday's paper, no doubt! Don't hunt for the cutting. It doesn't matter." Fred accepted this easily, as he wished to keep his own paragraph in the dark.

Miss Skinner was obliged to rush away, as it was past half-past five. She did so with a tempestuous vigour that seemed at odds with an expressed desire to mar no tranquillity; to be, as it were, a cypher in daily life. It would have been as easy to credit with sincerity a whirlwind's apologies to the sands of the desert. However, she *did* go, and peace reigned. Fred assuaged Conrad with profiles of animals to order, cut from the newspaper, even as the inhabitants of storyland had to keep Dragons satisfied with Princesses. Cintra, over Fred's shoulder, observed the operation with suggestions. Meanwhile her father, at ease about the morals of his youngest, who was being good, chatted before the fire about the use of chloride of gold as a manure; she offered to hunt up the newspaper containing the missing letter. "It won't take five minutes to find, you foolish old Papa," said Cintra.

"Oh no no no no!" said he, disclamatorily. "Not the least necessity! Doesn't matter having it now. Only see that it's not thrown away." He revised the merits of the German Professor's proposal, and her stepmother thought it becoming to

profess an interest—though a patronising one—in manure generally, and a specially respectful one in chloride of gold for its own sake. "It certainly appears to me," said he, "that Schleichreicher may be right; that is, if his datum—which I gather has the authority of Niehtraucher of Leipzig—is correct about the percentage of gold required to sterilise the bacillus of his newly discovered microbe, *bacteria nonconformis*. He places it at one ten-thousandth of a gramme for every cubic metre of arable soil. This would be at the rate of one-tenth of a milligramme for each cubic metre, or say one milligramme to ten cubic metres. . . . I know it works out in practice at about twenty pounds worth of gold to the square mile."

"But, my love," said his lady-wife, addressing him from an elevation, but with exemplary patience; "have you considered? Think what the farmer could buy with that twenty pounds, if he devoted it to the purchase of necessities for his household, instead of squandering it on filthy manure. I cannot persuade you to think. Fancy twenty *whole pounds* spent on manure!"

"My dear Felicia, it's no use saying have I considered. Have you considered? Work it out at per acre!" The Professor proceeded to show that, supposing the bacillus of *bacteria nonconformis* died childless, the value of the crop of each acre would be doubled, showing a net profit of Lord-knows-what.

Felicia replied that it was useless to talk to her about net profits, because her poor head could not endure such things; but one thing she must say, that gold was gold, and money was money, and it was sinful to throw either of them away. She confessed herself surprised at Science, and—briefly speaking—wondered it was not ashamed to talk such nonsense.

The Professor smiled as one who could afford to smile, and said magnanimously:—"It is only fair to observe that our friend Schleichreicher is a Socialist, and sees in this method a means towards the Redistribution of Property—of the most obnoxious form thereof; in fact the one which is responsible for the existence of Persons of Property. I must allow in fairness that I think him plausible on this point."

"How does he manage that?" said Fred. He was just completing an elephant with several legs like a centipede, by request. The centre of gravity of the first elephant had, by reason of the size of his head and trunk, crept in front of his forelegs, so that he fell forward at intervals. Conrad's excitement threatened to become uncontrollable.

"Don't kick, darling!" said Cintra. "Or Mr. Tarcrick will

have to put you down. . . . Yes, Papa dear!—how does the German with the long name manage that? . . . You said you thought him plausible.”

“Schreichlichreicher—oh yes!—I think him plausible. His view is that this employment of gold in the form of chloride will be so profitable that all the gold will be withdrawn from circulation to sterilise his bacillus. It will be distributed through the world’s arable land in such minute quantities that the recovery of it will be commercially out of the question. Five shillings worth of gold will cost five pounds to recover.”

“I see. But then we shall have to go without food and clothes. . . . Yes, we shall, if we have no money to buy them!!” Cintra said this.

The Professor admitted difficulties; but then, said he, no entirely new scheme is without its difficulties. We must remember that no two advocates of Socialism were agreed about its details; or, he might add, its fundamental principles. But he agreed with Schreichlichreicher this far, that his system would very soon diffuse the whole of the available gold in the world through the soil of its agricultural districts, doubling its output while absorbing the present currency. “However,” said he, consulting his watch; “I must be off or I shan’t catch Hopkins.” As the story has no need to know who Hopkins was, nor why the Professor wanted to catch him at that late hour on Sunday afternoon, it has made no enquiry about him.

CHAPTER X

"I HOPE they *hadn't* been quarrelling," said Nancy to herself as she slowed down for the first turning after leaving The Jessamines. For it is not until your female bicyclist, or anybody's, is sure she is started, and that her brakes are working right, and her skirts graciously disposed, that she can begin to soliloquise. Or rather, perhaps, to think what she would say if she *did* soliloquise.

So suppose we say this was what Nancy thought to herself. Anyhow, it was followed by the thought that she wondered what had made her think so. One can't always account for one's impressions. But, if they were quarrelling, she knew what it was about. Sure of that! Well—come now!—she would be candid with her own conscience and word her knowledge otherwise. She knew *who* it was about. There now! Was Conscience satisfied? Yes—Conscience was, not being hypercritical about grammar.

She and Conscience between them dramatised the incidents of her sister's welcome to her lover which took place half-an-hour before she looked in to say how-do-you-do and good-bye in one to him. First there would be questions to answer about his uncle; a matter of course! But what would come next? Well—naturally—the new *fiancée*, Mr. Snaith's. They had never talked her over, unless it were by letter. Nancy felt sure that Cintra had never deliberately written to Fred such a fulmination against the beauty as she had indulged in as they rode home after meeting her. Suppose that she had given Fred a like dose of her first impressions that morning. Plenty of materials for "words" there!

Consider how hand-and-glove these two young men were—"never out of each other's mouths" was a curious expression she herself had applied to them—and, apart from that, how *favourably impressed* Fred had seemed to be about his friend's lady-love. For that was the way she and Conscience agreed to describe the effect produced on him by that young beauty. It was part of the crystal purity of this young woman's soul that she would put each pair of declared lovers in a ring-fence. Her conviction that no one of them could ever, in the nature of

things—among decent people, that is—be found inside another ring-fence than his or her own, was unshakable. Fred was assigned to her sister and the beauty to Mr. Snaith, and the state of things so constituted was unchangeable. As to any possibility that this Miss Lucy Hinchliffe might herself be unstable, that did not form part of her reflections. According to Nancy, beauty and goodness always went hand in hand. Moreover, how could devotion to anything so ugly as Mr. Charles Snaith be founded on anything short of Predestination; soul meeting soul, and so forth? What better test of the reality of Love could there be than the repellent ugliness of one of its objects? Two human monsters—such, for instance, as Mr. Snaith and a feminine equivalent—might be drawn together by sympathy for each other's misfortune. But Beauty and Beast could only become bride and bridegroom when Beauty had some clue to the Beast's soul other than his personal appearance. On the whole, Nancy felt glad she herself was lacking in spiritual insight. Who could say what sort of a guy this mental shortcoming might not save her from? For she clung to—or rather was clung to by—an idea that she should marry, as other girls did. It was rather an expression of acquiescence in Destiny than either a creed or a hope.

These points occupied her mind as far as Streatham Common. There, the arriving at the turning she and her sister took when they went to look at the Old Madhouse, and the fact that this time she did *not* turn down it, set her a thinking of the inexplicable vanishment of Fred's uncle. Of course she was not touched personally—only just seen him, no more—and had not thought him lovable exactly. "Rather a peremptory sort of old gentleman," was the way she had described him afterwards. It was only when she came to know of this painful occurrence that she had resuscitated the slight memory she had of him.

She was so detached from him that she scarcely rebuked her inner consciousness for wondering whether his disappearance,—in view of its probable action as a skid on the wheel of the lovers' eagerness to possess The Cedars—ought not to be considered a godsend. But it was a nasty selfish idea, and she told it so. Poor old Dr. Carteret! Who could be sure he was not lying dead under a hedge somewhere? Not that she was going to believe *that* till she was forced to do so by revealed facts. There *must* be some solution of the puzzle short of murder or suicide, some unturned stone in the desert where it was hidden. She racked her brain to devise a possibility to fit the occasion,

but without much effect. Admitting murder, it was easy to imagine any number of methods to which an able-bodied and resourceful murderer might resort. But her object was to exclude murder altogether and find another solution; one that would admit of a reappearance of the Doctor in the flesh. Kidnapping sounded well, but did not bear examination. Her recollection of the massive figure, over six feet high, made her ask herself how a kidnapper would have gone about his job. How would you kidnap an elephant? She had read somewhere of subterranean bakehouses in ancient Rome, which used to catch the public through trap doors, and compel it to make bread for ever against its will. But she found that she only believed that story because it was ancient Rome, and History. She felt certain no such trap doors existed in England, now. She didn't see either that the victims in these cases were so much better off than if they had been honourably murdered.

She was driven back as a last resource on the theory that he had fallen asleep in the train, slept through all the stations in Exeter, and waked to find himself in Cornwall. She remembered with what horror she had looked down the shaft of a disused tin mine, and the obvious ease with which an adventurous stranger might climb the paling that kept cattle off, and pitch himself headlong to the bottom. She constructed a wildly improbable episode of the recovery of the Doctor's mangled corpse from such a trap, its slow resuscitation at a neighbouring farmhouse, and any amount of difficulty in establishing the whence and wherefore of a man without anything to identify him in his pockets—here the theory showed weakness—but with insensibility enough for its purpose, that of disestablishing speech or writing. She worked this idea all the way to Tooting Common, always with a painful sense of imaginary investigators—police or others—only failing to track the object of their search from sheer stupidity. She was compelled in the end to leave that hypothetical corpse at the bottom of that mine, probably under water. For she knew that disused mines become reservoirs.

She was not, however, so very long over any of these speculations, for she was scorching recklessly to be in time for lunch. However, Chelsea clock was still clear that it was ten minutes to one when she was crossing Battersea Bridge. Plenty of time! She brought her speed down to reason, and sounded her bell religiously.

Well, she could not be expected to feel Dr. Carteret's disap-

pearance as she would no doubt have done had she known him for a long time, but she could and did feel it deeply on his sister-in-law's behalf. She had seen how powerfully it had affected her friend, and something in the way that friend had spoken of the missing man had reached her imagination, and made her think that the ordinary cordiality of feeling for a husband's brother had gone near to becoming that of an actual sister, and an affectionate one. Of course the sheer horror of it—for nothing can ever surpass that of the unaccountable disappearance of a perfectly sane man—outweighed everything else while the thing was still so recent. Nancy could see that plainly. Still, the way Mrs. Carteret had spoken of him was nearer what Nancy would have expected had he been an own brother. That was all she could say to herself as she turned into Kensington High Street, and had to suspend reflections for a moment because of the traffic.

The dignified repose of Palace Gardens—where Nancy believed herself a trespasser, but knew no gate-warden could catch her—brought back the lost thread. It made no pretence that it had not had a business consideration in view all the time; namely, the delay which would probably occur in settling that co-tenancy of The Cedars. Perhaps it would be better, on the whole, if all the four of them would give up the idea, and try to find reasonable domiciles apart. For was not the whole thing founded on the cedar trees; the large garden; the great drawing-room; the staircases and their magnificent black balustrades; and above all on the stonecrop, moss, and lichen, which had maintained their fascination even when visited in the depth of winter, but which the builder would destroy the moment he was left alone with them? Nancy resolved that she would use all her influence with her sister to induce her to relinquish the preposterous scheme. Cintra was the only difficulty. Fred might be relied on to feel lukewarm, at least, about it unless—as Nancy fervently hoped *had* happened, and that she was just going to hear of it—the missing man should turn up alive and well, and fuming with indignation at the non-delivery of some letter, essential to the explanation of the mystery. That was really the most probable end of it all. People were always getting in a fuss about nothing.

How to keep up to a mile in four minutes, through continuous traffic in crowded streets, drove everything out of her head till she reached the railway-bridge-land which separates two nations, unlike one another in all essentials, though superficially alike

in some respects. A dweller in the St. John's Wood zone makes an outward show of being a fellow-creature of a resident in Bayswater proper—though all Bayswater is proper, for that matter—but is at heart another personality. Try being both, and see! Nancy, happening to have no N.W. connection except this one, resulting from her sister's engagement to Fred, always felt on the railway-bridge as though she were passing a frontier, and that really there ought to be gendarmes. This time another feeling crept in. Say what you might, human affairs were jolly unstable. Suppose her connection with N.W. was hanging in the balance, and this was her last bridge crossing! But really—stop! They were *not* quarrelling, and there was no reason why they should quarrel. All the same, she wished she had not caught herself noticing that they were at peace.

Anyhow, she was not going to have her adoration of the young gentleman's mother interrupted by any foolish lovers' quarrels. Why—they would make it up again, as like as not! And how then? The thought scarcely found words as definite as these. They might have done so though, had she not arrived at her destination.

"Well?" This was exclamation and question in one, neck and neck with her entry into the well-ordered drawing-room, sweet with the zest of its window conservatory, through which a south wind was saying something about the spring; and that it was like this last year, and the year before.

"No—we have heard nothing. And shall hear nothing until . . . But you know what I think. Don't let's talk about it." All the weariness and the pain of the prolonged anxiety was in her words. But the tempestuous bicyclist, coming in after a final rush against the wind, seemed good for her. "How fresh you are, Nancy dearest!" said she, inhaling the freshness during a kiss. It reached her heart through her lungs somehow, and made it happier. She interrupted an apology for lateness. "Oh no—that's all right! I very seldom get lunch till a quarter to two."

Then Nancy asked again, timorous, for possible news, and was again met with:—"Nothing—nothing—don't let's talk about it!" somewhat impatiently.

So she went off candidly to generalities. "I had the most delicious ride. . . . Oh yes—Fred had come. I left them in each other's arms all right. At least"—Nancy added, pouring out more fizz-water to quench an overwhelming thirst; for this was in the dining-room, later; or perhaps we should say in the

breakfast-room downstairs, which was more convenient for the waiting—"they were all right *then*. But I fancy they had had a little tiff. . . . Well—yes—they *had* had time. Fred had been there half an hour before I came in." With this girl, the slightest suspicion in her own mind that she was keeping anything back was an instant signal for saying it. You saw that in her eyes. So she was unable to be silent about that passing insight as she left The Jessamines.

"They are a rather quarrelsome pair of turtledoves," said Mrs. Carteret, equably. "That's their way. But they always make it up. I am never uneasy about lovers that kiss and make friends. If they do it once, they may do it a hundred times. . . . New potatoes—yes! They are the first this year. I always welcome the new potatoes."

"I only meant that sort of thing," said Nancy. "The lovers, not the potatoes. They will pass their lives quarrelling and making it up again. Everyone to his taste—or hers if she's a her. It would bore *me* to death."

"You are quite unlike your sister. Only I'm not sure that I know her well enough to say so. It's an odd ignorance to confess to, as she's to be my daughter-in-law. I shall know her in time—perhaps."

Nancy laughed. "That sounds so funny," said she. "She seems to me easy enough! She's just—she's just Cintra. Nothing else!"

"Why, of course! Just what she was in the nursery. People are, to their sisters. It's extraordinary how usual one's belongings are." A short discussion followed, owing to the persistent refusal of wine by the bicyclist, who, however, consented in the end to pour a glass of Zeltinger into twice as much Apollinaris. "Now I hope that will satisfy you," said she. "I can't tell what people want with wine, when there's water." Which concession having been made, Mrs. Carteret went back to the previous question. "Yes—you are very unlike your sister. Now, if . . . but I'm afraid you'll be shocked if I say what I was going to say."

"No, I shan't. Say it."

"Well—suppose I put it this way! If it were you that was going to halve a house with a friend and his wife—you and your husband, you know . . ."

"I thought the idea was to split it into two houses."

"That doesn't matter—it comes to the same thing."

"Well?"

"I shouldn't feel the least uneasy about . . . about its answering. I am not sure that I don't, with Cintra."

Cintra's sister looked at her friend in a candid, puzzled way. "Why," said she, "there won't be any housekeeping to fight about."

"No, that is so. That will be a great advantage." But the handsome eyes remained at rest on that utterly unsuspecting face, as though their owner had left something unsaid; something she felt in doubt of wording rightly.

Nancy caught their import. "Well, but what else is there to fight about?"

Mrs. Carteret seemed to decide against saying it. "Very likely nothing else," said she. "We must hope so."

But to ask this young woman to relinquish a doubt unsolved was like asking an arrow to stop and talk. "No, but what did you mean, though?" said she.

Mrs. Carteret confessed to the truth of what was left unsaid. "I changed my mind about saying it," said she. "But what I meant was that other things than housekeeping may upset harmony, between young couples." She looked straight into the frank, enquiring eyes fixed on hers, to see the idea fructify. It took time—not much—but enough to wait in.

Then it dawned, and was laughed to scorn. "I see now," said Nancy. "Just like me not to, good gracious me!—why, only fancy! Jealousy like in Browning, and people one knows! Oh no—it isn't Venice nowadays. I wish it were; it would be so much less stuffy. Fancy a toccata of Galuppi's with Mr. Snaith in it!"

"How you do despise that most estimable of young men!"

"Oh I know—he's worthy! But—his nose!"

"My dear, he can't help his nose. But haven't we wandered from the point?"

"Perhaps we have. It wasn't his nose. What was it?" At this juncture Lipscombe was allowed to take away and put the other things on the table, and then she might go. In the lull which followed, Nancy consented to countenance lemon-sponge and even Madeira cake. Then she picked up the thread of conversation:—"What was it—the point?"

"Whether it's altogether wise for these two young couples to come to an anchor so very close alongside."

Nancy reflected. "I hadn't thought of it. Perhaps it isn't."

"I am quite sure it isn't. Only I shouldn't be really so certain if . . . if my daughter-in-law were more like her sister."

"Can't alter it now! Sorry Cit's not so superhuman as I am. May I have the little dish of chocolates at this end of the table, to take as many as I like?"

"Certainly, dear! Eat them all up . . . I didn't exactly mean it that way. I meant that in the exact position that will be created, if these geese go and live at the Old Madhouse, Cintra may not suit the situation."

"Cintra particularly?"

Mrs. Carteret gave no direct answer, but continued:—"I only go by my knowledge of Fred, and general observation. Perhaps a little special observation the other day, when you were all here at lunch."

"Oh!"

"Why do you say 'Oh' in that . . . well—drastic sort of way?"

"Did I? I suppose I did. But it was because of something."

"Naturally. Because of what?"

The story has seen that Nancy had no idea of reserves or secrets. So it does not wonder at her answer. "Because Cit was so . . . so *nasty* about that beautiful Miss What's-her-name, that's to be Mrs. Nosey—Lucy Hinchliffe. Don't you think her ducky?"

"Beauty apart—or no?"

"Both ways. Any way. Do say you love her!"

"How if I don't?" She laughed out at Nancy's enthusiasm

"You are the most susceptible . . . youth, Nancy dear!" said she.

"Well—why shouldn't I be? Why are the boys to have it all to themselves? Anyhow, I thought her absolutely lovely."

"So did my son, I think." She spoke drily, or was it only fatigue? Nancy's eyes, frankly fixed on her, asked which, as plainly as words. She answered the implied question:—"Yes—I meant that I thought *he* was . . . *impressionné*."

"Why shouldn't he be?"

"No reason in life. At least, as long as your sister doesn't misunderstand him. That's all I meant to say. Fred is like that. Only it means nothing. Shan't we go upstairs? It's comfortabler. Lipscombe will bring coffee up." Lunch had died away.

All the way upstairs—and from the breakfast-room it was quite a climb to the drawing-room—Nancy was silently thoughtful, and seemed to be embarrassed by a nascent idea. It had become clear enough to talk about by the time Lipscombe had

adhibited the coffee, and withdrawn. "I see what you meant," she said. "I'm not sure that the idea hadn't crossed my own mind and gone out on the other side. Only I had nothing to go upon, you know!" Then instinctive veracity prompted a correction:—"Except perhaps Cintra flying into such an awful rage about Miss Hinchliffe when we were riding home."

"What did she say about her? You can tell me safely. I shall not repeat it."

"Called her an odious girl, I think. . . . Yes, I'm sure of that. Then that she was a commonplace type, and an insipid chit. I call that flying into an awful rage."

"Call it legitimate indignation, a little overdone! Did she say anything else?"

Nancy reflected. "Said it was easy for me, but I shouldn't have to live in the same house. . . . Oh yes—she called her an artificial minx."

"I see, at least I think I do. But I may be mistaken. We shall see how it works out. There is some chance—*some* chance, not much—of this beautiful Lucy girl taking a dislike to the house when she sees it. There was something—Fred told me—about their going down to-day to look at it."

"Have you seen any more of her?—seen her again since then?"

"She called, with her mother. A prodigious lady, who flashed with rings, and diffused a scent."

"What sort of scent?—patchouli?"

"Oh no—a much nicer scent. It made me think of Nepaul, but I don't know why. I've never been there."

"I know what Nepaul smells like. The inside of old boxes—cedar wood, that sort of thing! But of course *I've* never been there, either."

"Well—she was like that. You know the sort. They were very civil. . . . I feel it's ungracious not to say kind and sympathetic. Perhaps I ought to? Only I was a little surprised that they should know so much about this . . ." She flinched off giving it a name.

"I know," said Nancy. "Dr. Carteret. But I see why. Fred keeps nothing from Mr. Snaith, and Mr. Snaith tells her everything."

Mrs. Carteret thought a little over this, and then said:—"I suppose it doesn't matter very much. It will be in all the newspapers very soon." She of course knew nothing of the paragraph in the *Daily Telegraph* of two days since, and her

anticipation referred to the police advertisement, which she knew was imminent.

Nancy harked back suddenly, *more suo*, to a previous point in the conversation, which had weighed on her mind. "Why did you say *legitimate* indignation?" said she.

"Because I might have felt exactly as your sister felt, in the same position."

"You wouldn't have said insipid chit and artificial minx."

"I don't know. I should have felt hurt, certainly. A young lady in love cannot be philosophical always." She paused, considered, and added:—"I'm not sure that it wasn't a little my fault."

"How could that be?"

"I mean for letting you rush away like that. Fred and Cit should have had half an hour alone together to work it off—to snap and snarl for twenty minutes, and bill and coo for ten, and then it would have been all right. Only, to tell the truth, I was longing to get rid of you, to talk to Fred about what he had just heard. . . ."

"I know. I expect that was why he let us go so easily. But it was really her fault, for being such a fool about riding in the dark. As if it mattered. I mean to stop here ever so late—if you'll have me . . ."

"Of course I'll have you."

". . . And ride home in the pitch-dark, in the middle of the night. I think it's fun, because the traffic's gone to bed, and you can scorch to your heart's content."

"Cintra's frightened?"

"Well—she *is*! And that's the truth." Then Nancy's ruling passion of veracity got the better of her. "I shouldn't pay any attention to her nonsense, only for papa. He fusses. Says I may break my own neck if I like, but not my sister's. All Scientific men are nervous."

"Is that the case?" And indeed it did seem too broad a generalisation.

Nancy got back to her base. "Anyhow, I must pay attention to papa; he's such a dear good old fussy-wussy. Him and his messes!" This was not an expression of contempt for Research, so much as of affectionate leniency to a human parent's weaknesses.

Mrs. Carteret transposed the key without apology. "You don't . . . get on . . . with your stepmother," she said, feeling her way through the question.

Nancy wrinkled up her eyes slightly, to express caution against over-statement, and Justice. "I don't think one ought to say quite that," she said.

"How far are you inclined to go?" Nancy thought she saw amusement in the beautiful eyes that were fixed on her, but no smile endorsed it on the lips. It was the weight of the sad time, dictating obedience.

She answered the question. "We don't spit fire at one another—not now. I should say we were *friendly*. A sort of perpetual truce."

"Is that all?"

"I can't do any better than that. However, I shan't quarrel with her, because of Conrad. At least, not so long as he keeps kissable. They go off, you know."

"I know. But I thought he was such a troublesome child."

"So he is. He is simply as bad as ever he can possibly be. He's detestably overbearing and argumentative, and greedy beyond belief. But the back of his neck's *delicious*." The young lady's face as she said this might have been—but for organic differences—that of a well-disposed vulture, happy at the thought of entrails.

Her hostess seemed to find these domestic particulars a pleasant distraction, to judge by her amused face. "Have you settled what to call your stepmother?" she asked.

"Well—no—we haven't! It's a fix. 'Mamma' of course continues out of the question. And we can't possibly call her 'Steppy Weppy' to her face."

"Do I know her name? I think not."

"Her Christian name? Felicia. She was called after Mrs. Hemans. So her American Miss Nicholls, who's a *clairvoyante*, wants her to turn Reincarnationist, because then she'll be able to believe she was Mrs. Hemans and her great-aunt Mary was Mary Queen of Scots."

"I thought Mrs. Hemans hadn't been long enough dead."

"What for? Oh—for anyone else to be her! I don't think there's any rule. You have to be born after the person dies, that's all. Mrs. Hemans was quite dead, anyhow. Of course it wouldn't do if they overlapped. By-the-by now, how odd that I've never thought of that! Was Mary Queen of Scots Mrs. Hemans's great-aunt?"

"Not that I know of. Why?"

"To make it fit—don't you see? Steppy Weppy was her

great-aunt Mary's great-niece, so Mrs. Hemans ought to have been Mary Queen of Scots. To make a job of it."

Mrs. Carteret went as near a smile as the shadow on her mind permitted; more at her young friend's serene unconsciousness of anything unusual in her speech, than at the substance of it. "Mary Queen of Scots," said she, "seems to be rather a popular sort of person to have been. I once knew two Reincarnationist ladies who had both been Mary Queen of Scots."

"Didn't they fight?"

"In the end, yes. One of them asked the other to come and meet her—the asker's—former husband, and when she came, introduced a gentleman who had been Darnley. Or Bothwell—I forget which. That parted them, I believe."

They chatted on, thus or otherwise, till the Sunday afternoon had worn itself out, and was of the mind to become a Sunday evening. It was a chat with a drawback—the exclusion from it of a topic. Could any talk be other than a makeshift, with the consciousness of its dark background, ever present to the girl's eyes in the fixed sadness of the older woman's face? It had been easy for Nancy to tell herself, as she spun at fifteen miles an hour over Streatham Common, that she had only just set eyes on old Dr. Carteret, and therefore his disappearance, to her, was like a thing in a newspaper, matter for the tearless lamentation due to perfect strangers in trouble. But here by the fireside, in the very presence of another's sorrow, and that other the object of one of those impulsive outbursts of affection to which she was subject, that sorrow became her own. She wished that her friend had not headed her off the tragedy at the outset, leaving her bound in honour to be silent. Not that she could do any good.

However, a continued silence about it was not in the nature of things, and Nancy's uneasy sense of their mutual consciousness was destined to end very shortly. Nothing unlocks speech like tea, or even a sound prospect of it. And the advent of Lipscombe as its harbinger—a benevolent Angel bearing a white damask flag of universal truce—had cut across the topic of the moment, and left a blank space for whichever of them chose to embark upon a new one. The tea, made but not poured, must have been impatient for its destiny by the time its maker broke upon the stillness quite suddenly, to say to her young friend:—"You know what I think it was. He was killed, and we may never know how. Until we know, we cannot call it . . ." She stopped abruptly, and then continued:—"But one shudders to speak the word. I won't if you don't like."

Nancy answered:—"I know what you mean. But why not? What do we gain by not calling it . . ." But she flinched from the word itself.

Mrs. Carteret supplied it quietly. "By not calling it murder."

"If it is . . ." Nancy began. But again she fought shy of those two ugly syllables.

"If it is murder?" said Mrs. Carteret as before, with the same absolute self-command. "I am convinced of it. But I should be hard put to it if I had to give reasons that would convince anyone else. I believe my reasons are no reasons. But I am convinced of it." Her hand was cold and shook, though her voice was so calm and self-possessed. Nancy knew this, for she had left her seat to stand nearer the fire, and now she went over to her friend and kissed her, being at a loss what to say. She sat on a stool at her feet, and held her hand so that she knew that she was cold.

"Why should you be so convinced?" said she. "Where—when—*how* could it have been? He *must* have been found . . ."

"Does it follow? They say they have searched. But what is their searching worth? When Fred asked the Inspector if all the ponds along the line had been dredged, what was the answer? There *were* no ponds! I know *one*—a big one. Out near Farnham, I think it is."

"I remember. But is it deep enough?"

"It may be, or it may not. I know nothing about the pond. Only it shows what their search is worth, that they have not dredged it. It is on the line, and one stone unturned takes the edge off the whole. But that is not quite . . ."

Nancy waited, and then said:—"Not quite what?"

"Not quite what I wanted to say. If I say it, you will think me superstitious—whatever that means."

"Shall I? I don't believe I shall."

"Yes, you will. I should think myself so, only I believe there are ways—reasonable ones—of accounting for dreams and second-sight . . . and all that sort of thing." Mrs. Carteret was one of those who want to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds; to scoff at bodies like ourselves for being superstitious, but to call in Natural Law to protect their own phenomena. For there is never a soul but keeps one, somewhere.

Said Nancy, curiosity all aflame:—"It *was* a dream or a second-sight, then? You *will* tell it me, won't you?"

"I don't at all mind telling you, because I think the thing

can be accounted for quite reasonably, without bringing in any nonsense. . . . I must pour the tea, or it will get cold. I'm sure your father talks about molecules."

"Well—he *does*. And I always hope he understands what he's talking about. But do go on. Come to the second-sight!"

"I will directly. . . . Here's your tea. . . . Has he told you that every molecule in the Universe has an attraction for every other molecule?"

"I think he has mentioned it, and I suppose he knows. Only there are *such* a lot of them."

"I believe it is a Scientific fact. However, I'll tell you the second-sight if you like, and leave the molecule alone."

"Go on your own way, and I'll listen."

"Well—I thought it showed . . . a sort of Compliance with Natural Law. But I'll tell you. It was on the same day—at least, that night. I mean the night before you both came to lunch, three weeks ago. It was like this. I woke in the middle of the night with a start, and the room was light. It didn't last long, but long enough for me to see . . ."

"See what?" Nancy asked this because the narrative paused.

"See a figure kneeling. Exactly like *him*! With the hands up."

"With the hands up?" Nancy did not quite see how.

"Yes. I did not understand it then. I saw afterwards. The hands were up . . ."—it cost her an effort to go on—"to ward off a blow, and the head was down."

Nancy shuddered. "What did you do? Were you not terrified?" she said.

"Not in the least. Dreams often hold on after one wakes, long enough to count a dozen. I just went to sleep again, as soon as I could. Remember, that *then* we knew nothing."

"I should have been frightened. . . . Well—upset, then."

"No, you wouldn't. I went to sleep again, and thought nothing of it. Then when I woke by daylight, I saw it again—a dark silhouette in the same place, exactly."

"And did not that upset you?"

"No—the other way round, if anything. It showed that it was *me*—in myself, I mean. For it died away into the wall behind it. And then I saw that it was the pattern I had been looking at; a bit the same shape as the figure, that my eye had picked out. Did you never have that happen to you?"

"I can't say I ever did."

"That's odd. It does, to me. I thought nothing of it, and indeed forgot all about it."

"Why shouldn't you? He was all right then, so far as you knew?"

"Of course he was. But I remembered it later, when we came to know. And I am convinced that—that I saw what had actually happened, and that it will prove so."

Discussion followed, the older lady pointing out the possible analogy of an experience of this sort to the connection between molecule and molecule at infinite distances apart. If mere molecules could act sympathetically under such a drawback, surely our more delicate organisations would show a sensitiveness at such a very short distance. Nothing, she said, would shake her belief in this dream or vision, except the reappearance of her brother-in-law in the flesh, alive and well. She seemed, however, always anxious to be rational, and to bring it into conformity with some received opinion, no matter what.

Nancy, on the other hand, although the daughter of a Professor of Applied Science, seemed to think we had better be honestly superstitious, or discredit evidence altogether. "Only I do think, dear Mrs. Carteret, that your brother-in-law might walk into the house at any moment—or more likely into the school,—and the whole thing be explained. But what a parcel of fools he would think us, for getting in such a stew about him!" Mrs. Carteret said:—"No one would be so glad to be thought a fool as I. But it won't be that way, Nancy dear. You will see that I am right. That is too nice a thing to happen in a world like ours."

CHAPTER XI

MAN, according to the ratiocinations specious of Aristotle or Smiglesius, is a thing endowed with reason. This story hopes that the ratiocinations of those philosophers are at least specious in their answers—if any—to the question why Man accepts the disappearance of his fellow-man into the absolutely unknown with greater complacency than a suspension of his visible audible and tangible presence, which may be only temporary, within the presumed limits of known existence. Do they consider it an evidence of his rational endowment that he looks on his own absolute ignorance of what and where the thing is that his deceased neighbour once called *ego*, as a distinctly better position than uncertainty of what has become of the only evidence he has ever had of that *ego's* existence? The story does, and further is grateful for the knowledge that his dead neighbour, wherever he has gone, has left behind him the thing he used to suffer with. He has shuffled off his mortal coil. Was the author of the Christmas mummers play inspired, when he invented "Little Devil Doubt"?

It is one of the cruelest things, in disappearance without warrant of death, that Grief must, as it were, hold her hand. Tears may long to come, but dare not. Lamentation can find no word that may not have to be unsaid, and the evil chance grudges the survivor the poor consolation of eulogisms on the vanished man—the man who may not have departed. Which of us has not felt glad at heart that the assurance of death has gagged the tongue that would speak ill of some very human friend, and has left us free to magnify such redeeming features as our imagination can assign to him? Devise, if you can, an attitude for his mind who knows not if his friend be dead or living. The epitaph's license of praise is not allowed him; and yet, until he knows, he has to provide oblivion for shortcomings that may reappear with their proprietor, till there is a guarantee that he is safe on the other side of the Styx. Poor Tom or Bob or Jim, who drank, goes God-knows-where, and the haunts of men—of you and me, that is—know his incoherencies no more. Is it safe, yet-awhile, to pretend that Tom—or Bob, or Jim—was sobriety itself, when he may come back drunk at any moment,

to throw doubt upon the well-meant fib? You would welcome him drunk—true enough. But how about your own well-preserved character for veracity?

But then in such a case as Tom's—or Bob's or Jim's—there is compensation, say what we may. We shall never again have to send for a cab to take him safe home, after a noisy postscript at our table to the expansive geniality—no more—that he brought with him, perhaps from the nearest pothouse. We shall never have to practise legerdemain again, to keep the bottle from him at that table, and to acknowledge ourselves beaten. We shall never have to pretend that he is sober, terribly handicapped by his endeavours to help our pretext; praying any unseen agency that is well-disposed towards us to make him hold his tongue. Yes—there is a good side to his disappearance, if we can only be guaranteed against his resurrection; and we may feel happy about it to the extent of not fretting. Or, if we think that that much selfishness will lower us in our own good opinion, we may perceive how great an anxiety he was to his poor wife; and, if the guarantee is a strong one, go to the length of hoping that Mrs. Tom or Bob or Jim will get over his loss, and marry again, and do better next time, and all that sort of thing. Because that is consistent with altruism.

But this did not hold good of Mrs. Carteret's grief. The sting to her lay in the dumb uncertainty of what was coming. Her curious confidence that her brother-in-law lay murdered somehow, somewhere, may have driven all other speculations out of her mind, but the dire revelation of the manner of his death was still to come. What could she look forward to till it should come, but a terrible silence of the mind, a stupid hunger to know more, with a gruesome fear of the form that it might take? This, and a misgiving at times that she had no right to trust her own conviction, kept her whole soul on the strain, and while she longed for sympathy, she felt she had no claim to throw the full shadow of her apprehension over a young mind like Nancy's. Yet she had not been able to resist the temptation to declare her belief that the thing was murder, and to talk of the odd dream incident that was its cause; or, but for the fact that it happened before it was known that Dr. Carteret had never reached his destination, might have been its result.

The story sees, in this reluctance of Mrs. Carteret to show the full depth of her depression, how she came to be able to theorise about the sympathies of distant molecules and so forth. It was

not merely a wish on her part to disclaim superstition; it was to suggest that behind her personal conviction of the disaster was a readiness to admit the possibility, at least, of her brother-in-law's reappearance alive and well. So when she said that was too nice a thing to happen in a world like ours, she meant Nancy to understand that her disheartenment was short of despair. The girl accepted her words in that sense, but was quite alive to the misery and tension of the prolonged doubt, which to her thinking was as bad as the worser certainty.

Nancy tried her best, by advancing possible improbabilities that would cover the mystery, to undermine that verdict of murder against some person unknown; but without success. Perhaps, had any of her theories been more ingenious than that one about the disused Cornish mine, she might have scored. But as a matter of fact it was far and away the best of them.

That wild hypothesis of Fred's briefly referred to by him in his letter to her sister, had of course been passed on to Nancy, with whatever seemed wanting to its completeness supplied by the narrator. Could she dare, in view of the seeming establishment of a confidence already near high-water mark, to ask her friend if that tale had any foundation? Why, no—not if there was to be any tact or caution in the asking; that was not her line. She could keep off people's corns altogether, but she could not go over them on tiptoe.

Need this be a corn at all? Nancy answered this in the negative, before saying, without reserve:—"Is there anything in that story of Fred's, about Dr. Carteret's early love-affair, that might have had something to do with it? Or is it only romance?"

Mrs. Carteret said:—"I never gave the boy leave to publish *that!*"

Nancy said:—"Cit told me. Do I matter?"

"No—my dear! *You* don't matter. . . . But, however!—I suppose I must learn to be more discreet now I have a son engaged. I never had one before. I might have known he would repeat everything to your sister. He lost no time, I must say." She was not displeased—so Nancy thought—that so unreserved a confidence should exist in that quarter. It sounded *real*.

"I didn't see the letter it was in, and that was all she told me—that he thought the two things might have some connection. . . ." Nancy wanted to explain something in three words, and became a little complex. "I didn't know it wasn't a thing he hadn't always known," said she.

"Oh no—I had just told him. He knew nothing about it. It was before he was born or thought of—when I was a little girl. I don't the least mind telling you." She then repeated all she had told Fred, in nearly the same words.

"Why did Fred think that would throw light on this . . ."

"On this business? It won't. He got some crazy idea that this lady—I never knew who she was; my mother would never tell me—had come on the *tapis* again; as a widow, I suppose. If she had lost her husband lately, of course the thing would not have been out of the question; though even then I don't know why it should have worked out this way. . . ."

"No—why there should be any mysteries and secrecies. It seems so needless."

"Absolutely. It would have been all the other way. Fancy the effect on the school! Fancy a headmaster who neglected his school without notice, to negotiate a secret wedding! Such an uncalled-for escapade!"

"I should have taken my boy away, and sent him to another school." This imaginary family would have provoked a smile at any other time.

Mrs. Carteret went back a few bars. "But she had *not* lost her husband lately. For my mother told me this much about her, that she was a widow, years ago. Why—my mother has been dead seven years! And it was a long time before her death, because she certainly was not completely paralysed when she told me."

"Five years—suppose?"

"More than that. Indeed, I fancy it was not far short of the time my dear husband died. But I couldn't say for certain. Anyhow, one can only make it possible by supposing she had just lost a second husband. Does it seem likely?"

"I don't know. I can't say it seems to make so very much difference—to me."

"Well, perhaps not." Mrs. Carteret seemed to assent because she was thinking of something else. It could not be in the fire, still welcome in the evening, in May's early snap of cold; although a coal, that volleyed out a tar-blaze by fits and starts, was doing its best to attract attention. No—her mind was trying back for dropped fragments of the past. At last it came, as though she roused herself to speak. "I was trying to recall exactly what my mother said. But the time makes it so difficult. I do remember this, though—that when she told me the lady was a widow, I naturally suggested that they might be

brought together again. She became very emphatic, saying several times over:—"It would be impossible—impossible—impossible!" I can remember the difficulty she had in saying it, because the stroke had affected her speech. I can't be sure about what else she said. But I did catch some of it, certainly." Nancy held her tongue and waited, feeling she had no claim to know more, until Mrs. Carteret spoke again, almost as in response to her thought. "Well—it sounded like 'It would have been all right before her marriage,' which seemed nonsense. It does, doesn't it? . . . What's that?" For the girl had started, and the start had been felt by the hand that held hers. Mrs. Carteret took a cause for granted. "These coals are nothing but slate," said she. "They spit horribly!"

"It wasn't a coal," said Nancy. "Only an idea in my head." But she didn't say what it was, except that it was nothing. Mrs. Carteret did not press for it, only looked in an affectionate amused way at the heightened colour and animated eyes this "nothing" had had the power to produce. Possibly a pull at the visitor's bell below was responsible for this, as an incursion seemed imminent.

The little dachshund, who had passed a profitable afternoon inside the fender, asleep with the cat, heard incident afoot and came hurriedly to attend to the matter. He got out of the room and downstairs to see that the visitors belonged to a class he could sanction, and was—so to speak—heard smelling them below, while Lipscombe reassured them by a report of the date when he had last bitten the unoffending Public. They were the Bagster Sutcliffes, or some equivalent thereof; and why they need come so late Heaven—according to the lady of the house—only knew! She was sorry now that it was too late, that she hadn't told Lipscombe to say not at home. It certainly *was* too late, for the Bagster Sutcliffes were upon us.

It was impossible to distinguish one from the other of them, and their plurality was indeterminate of that account. Nancy afterwards told her sister that she had not the slightest idea whether there were three or five. From the moment of their entry they all spoke at once, and their apologetic geniality—which never wore out the topic of the lateness of their visit—was as a whirlwind strong enough to knock down ornaments, break piano-candles, and sweep away antimacassars. At least, there was food for apprehension on this score. But the Bagster Sutcliffes had one very high quality. They had had tea.

It was a visit, not a riot—whatever you might have thought.

No Visit Act exists, or they might have been dispersed before seven o'clock. As it was, a species of gush had to be maintained in the interests of Society, until quite suddenly it dawned on all the Bagster Sutcliffes at once that it was time to go. They exclaimed simultaneously that they were paying "an unconscionable long visit." But they did not act on the discovery. On the contrary, they seemed proud of stopping longer still, and not in the least ashamed. No one had thrown doubt on their statement; but they had determined, apparently, to be on the safe side, so stopped longer. After this had occurred once or twice, a change seemed to come over them, and they exclaimed disjunctedly that they really must go, and got up and sat down again at intervals.

Even so—in quite another connection—sea-birds on the sands seem to suggest flight to the community by little musical cries, far apart; while daring spirits, one by one, fly a few flaps over their reflections, to the same end, the import of each short span of wingcraft being clearly:—"This is how it's done, like this. You do it too, all of you!" Then in the end all rise together, and they and their reflections are gone, and we are the worse thereby. After each Bagster Sutcliffe had shown its kind tentatively how to go, the whole number of them took flight, like the birds.

Whereupon Mrs. Carteret, so far from seeming the worse, said:—"Oh dear!—I thought those people were never going to go. What were we talking about, dear?" But Nancy had quite honestly forgotten about the idea in her head that wasn't a coal, nor could she have formulated it afresh at a moment's notice. So she said she had forgotten, and—to soften off the Bagster Sutcliffes—said that the smallest one was rather pretty, and that the plump one was rather silent, and that the mother had an interesting expression. To which Mrs. Carteret assented perfunctorily, seeming much more alive to the fact that it was time to get ready for dinner.

The incidents of the day have been followed thus closely to account for Mrs. Carteret not having seen that announcement in yesterday's *Daily Telegraph*. The story knows so far, that it had been overlooked at Nancy's own home, and it has now been seen that it could not have transpired at Maida Vale except through the Bagster Sutcliffes, or Mrs. Carteret reading it in the *Daily Telegraph*. When a paragraph occurs in one journal only on Saturday, it may, or may not, be in the Sunday papers. As it chanced, this paragraph about Dr. Carteret's disappearance

was copied into the *Observer*. But Mrs. Carteret did not see it. She was at church in the morning, and in the afternoon preferred talking with her young friend to any newspaper. So the *Observer* lay neglected—perhaps too proud to complain. At any rate, it did not.

Now, it would have been the merest affectation in Nancy to make any pretence of preparation for dinner. Her dressing dress was at odds with ideas of the sort, and the absence of company—for the Bagster Butcliffes were callers—not warranted its retention. So soap-and-water and a brush and comb exhausted the subject in five minutes, and she was back in the drawing-room some time before her hostess appeared more completely groomed. Under such circumstances it is natural to feel at a loose end, and one usually opens a book to make it a fast one. Nancy looked for a book of the right sort—one that you were not obliged to begin at the beginning, but might go on with from just anywhere. She made a mental stipulation to that effect before picking samples out of the expandible slide on the table, and found nothing that complied with it. Then her eye was caught by the uncomplaining *Observer*, on a most uncomfortable chair with feet like Liebig the dachshund's, an ogee back, and a *siège* so rotund that it was a wonder the *Observer* hadn't slipped off; a chair that brought to Nancy's mind an acrobat who stood on the Terrestrial Globe, and made it climb the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle. She decided that she might make bold to open that *Observer*, seeing that it wasn't done up in a wrapper, only folded.

She did so, and the first words that caught her eyes were:—"Mysterious Disappearance." She had never known or been near anyone who had been in a newspaper, and believed that only a particular class—not hers—were allowed that privilege. Whence the first effect of these words upon her was to make her think Coincidence was busy on disappearances, and it was very odd. And so deeply ingrained was her belief, that the first words of the paragraph only pointed to the fact that Coincidence was going strong. It was odd that two headmasters should disappear simultaneously. But when it came to Vexton Stultifer School, a belated light broke upon her, and showed her the identity of the two cases. She supposed Mrs. Carteret knew all about the paragraph. She *must*. And yet!—how about the wording of it? She read it twice, and did not find it improve on re-reading. Of course this sort of thing might suit "the

people in the Newspaper"—her mind found this phrase for them—but how about human creatures? Then she read it a third time, and on reflection was obliged to confess that she did not see how else they could have expressed it, with some slight exceptions. Probably any newspaper statement, written journal-wise, always has the same appearance to its subjects, when they do not court publicity.

She concluded, therefore, that she would make no critical comment on the paragraph; but treat it as the usual thing, and to be expected inevitably. But she would like to know about the clue the police had. She had heard of nothing.

If it had not been for this, the evening might have passed without revival of the subject, for she had made up her mind not to refer to it again unless Mrs. Carteret did. She left the *Observer*, folded, where she had found it, and seeing no disposition on her friend's part to disturb it, said nothing of what she had read in it. The continued presence of Lipscombe during dinner, also, which dated from her announcement thereof two minutes after her mistress appeared, stood in the way of any *causerie intime*. They could and did, however, get back to The Cedars, but only as premises. The contingencies of the two *ménages* were not for Lipscombe.

Mrs. Carteret had never seen the place, and had very little curiosity about it; it had seemed, as she expressed it, such an unmitigated castle-in-the-air. So far as she could make out, not a single difficulty in the way of the scheme had been fairly looked in the face. Supposing that the whole of what might be called the social difficulties—Lipscombe was outside at this moment—could be overcome, how about the cost? That was what she looked at. As far as she could make out from Fred, the very lowest figure for barely making the place livable was four hundred. And here were these young people devising all sorts of imaginary alterations and additions to a house which was really too large already. She only went by what she was told. Fred admitted that we should probably have to make up our minds to a thousand, and fifteen hundred was the price asked for the remainder of the lease, which was only twenty years! What was twenty years? Young people thought it was really a long time, but that was a complete mistake. "Ask any old stager, well on in the seventies, how long twenty years is—see if he does not say five minutes!" So said Mrs. Carteret.

Nancy was inclined to espouse the cause of twenty years against this attack. "Well!" said she. "I don't know. I've

lasted twenty-three years, and three times twenty-three is practically seventy. At that rate—I mean doing it by arithmetic—I ought to think twenty years a quarter of an hour. That's all fair and no cheating."

"Because of three times five minutes. Is that it?"

"Yes—to make it fair for both. If your old stager has a right to think twenty years five minutes, I've a right to think it a quarter of an hour. It stands to reason! Well, I think twenty years is quite twelve years morally, if not more."

"I'm afraid I'm unphilosophical—or un-something. Because I can't reckon it out that way. Besides, there's the way estimates jump; that has to be considered."

"Make allowance for the jumping—a good big margin. Add fifty per cent. . . . how much is that? . . . Anyhow, add plenty per cent." Nancy fought shy of figures.

"It wouldn't be of any use, dear! Whatever allowance you make, you have to pay more. The man at the office—what's he called: cashier?—makes a bigger allowance and beats. You have no chance, because he refers to entries."

"I know, and if you stick out, he finds he's made a mistake, and charges more. It's like that with boots. You are told twelve shillings or thereabouts, and they come to fourteen-and-six. It doesn't do to say 'suppose we say so much' because that gives them a loophole to cheat through. If you allow fifteen shillings, they come to seventeen-and-six."

"It's exactly the same with big jobs—houses and things." Both ladies reflected on business matters, and Lipcombe recurred. Mrs. Carteret apologised for the smallness of the Sunday menu, and Nancy said it was heaps. Mrs. Carteret consoled herself with the reflection that she knew Kettering could make mayonnaise sauce, and the fish was very good yesterday. She continued to chat on abstract points, perhaps because of Lipcombe. You can't talk before servants, and you know you can't—not about your Will, for instance. But you can about Number or Magnitude. This lady said:—"I daresay you've noticed, Nancy dear, what an inaccurate science Arithmetic is."

"Oh dear yes!" said Nancy. "It's never the same two minutes together."

"That's exactly it. If a sum would only remain the same, nothing could be more accurate. But somebody is sure to get at it—when you've got to pay, that is! When it's to be paid you, they take something off. You can't say anything. If you try, they take off more. But what the claim of Arithmetic is

to be considered an Exact Science—at least while it's done by other people—Heaven only knows!”

Nancy was pleased that her friend should run on like this; although to do so she was very negligent of the fish mayonnaise. But it implied that her mind was free for the time being; the nightmare was in abeyance. Nancy resolved that it was best not to recur to it, although she was keenly anxious to know what that clue could be that the newspaper alleged was in the hands of the police.

So they chatted on the subjects of the day. As for instance Psychical Research, which Mrs. Carteret said reminded her of Edie Ochiltree and “Ye are gude seekers but ill finders,” when he helped Herman Dousterswivel to dig for treasure. Or the last new bacillus discovered in Berlin, who was going to be an antidote to drunkenness and insanity, as well as tuberculosis. Nancy had heard of him at first hand, so to speak. “Papa was quite eloquent about him, bless his little heart!” said she, “after he met Professor Grockstroysch, or some such name, at the *soirée* in Albemarle Street.” Mrs. Carteret wanted to know how this Professor came to know anything about him; but explained, after elucidations, that she thought Nancy might be speaking of her little brother, and apologised for inattention. Professor Gutturals—that was the nearest she could go—was very interesting. But wasn’t it rather . . . she wouldn’t say disrespectful. . . . Well—suppose she said open to misinterpretation! . . . to bless her father’s little heart?”

Nancy had to think back, to get the clue to this. “Oh—I see,” she said. “It must have sounded exactly like that. Bless papa’s little heart by all means! But I meant the bacillus. Why, he’s only decimal ought-ought-ought something of a milligram long. I forget exactly what, but I know he’s jolly small.” This and remarks of a like sort would force a smile from Mrs. Carteret, more at the unconscious gravity of the speaker than the substance of what she said. As for Nancy, probably this was only her trivial treatment of the topics of the passing hour, a little exaggerated by a desire to avoid the subject in the background of the minds of both. But it hung on her lips, watched in corners of her mind for moments when no other thought occupied them; would not be gone and leave her free. Especially those last words of the newspaper paragraph haunted her, about the supposed success of the police. Mrs. Carteret *must* know what it was surely, if the *Observer* did.

Curiosity, backed by a feeling that each knew the other was

beset with silence about a thing that defied forgetting, got the better of Nancy, and she was the first to speak, taking for granted her friend's knowledge. "I wonder what the clue is?" said she.

Mrs. Carteret understood her to mean,—what clue *would* be found ultimately? There *was* no clue at present—she knew that. Her reply was—"Yes—I wonder, dear!"

"But don't you *know*?"

"How do you mean *know*, dear?"

"Haven't the police told you?"

"I don't understand." The way she looked round showed that she did not.

"The paragraph in the newspaper. The clue the police have. It said they had. . . . At least, I'm almost sure." Was it a mistake of hers? She rose and took up the *Observer* from the curly chair. Yes—there it was—sure enough! "Look here!" she said, and handed the open sheet to Mrs. Carteret, with her finger on the paragraph.

"I have never seen this," said that lady. She took it and read it, but did not seem disturbed by it at the moment. She seemed to read it twice through, carefully; then folded the paper and put it aside on the nearest table. "I wonder who wrote that," said she. "The police have no new clue—at least, they had none when Fred saw them yesterday, or Friday was it? Besides . . ."

"Besides what?"

"No one that knew anything about it would have written that nonsense about Sunday. The idea of stopping at home because it was Sunday never would have crossed my brother-in-law's mind. Now who ever wrote that nonsense? No one knows anything about it except the people at the school. And the police, of course."

Nancy jumped to a conclusion. "Then it must be the people at the school," said she, confidently.

Mrs. Carteret considered dreamily, with her eyes on the fire.

"It is certainly not Mrs. Orpen. Nor the boys, because she has told them Dr. Carteret has been sent for on important business, and she says they are quite satisfied. Nor the masters, if the one that came here is a sample. If ever I saw . . . a patch of discretion, it's that man! Besides, how about the Sunday nonsense? They all knew him better than that."

"Then it must be somebody else."

"That seems reasonable. But who? That's the point."

"Fred must have told somebody."

"He says distinctly that he hasn't. . . . Well—except of course Mr. Snaith."

"Why, of course?"

"Won't you allow him his 'of course.'"

"I won't allow Mr. Snaith anything, with . . ."

"I know what you were going to say." For Nancy had pulled up short.

"What was I going to say?"

"With a nose like that."

"I *wasn't*," said Nancy, emphatically. But her ingrained truthfulness called for qualification. "At least not *exactly* that! I do wish he was better looking though, if he's to be told things. And after all, I only said I didn't see his 'of course.' The police of course, if you like; but why Mr. Snaith of course? His nose doesn't come in." Mrs. Carteret explained that this gentleman, besides having been at school and college with Fred, was his legal adviser, and under a professional obligation to his clients in all matters of confidence. He certainly would not, without consulting Fred, have sanctioned the insertion of this paragraph, or any paragraph, in the daily Press. She was convinced that Fred had not seen it, or he would have told her.

A short interruption here was caused by the appearance of Lipscombe, who was due about ten o'clock to induce Liebig and the cat to retire for the night to their proper sleeping quarters. It would have been shorter still if Liebig had been convinced by repeated experience that endeavours to sleep in the drawing-room were useless. He clung to the idea that craft might succeed where reason failed. "I think," said Mrs. Carteret when Lipscombe appeared, "that the dog is behind the curtain this time." He was, and was deported. The cat, less inventive or more orderly, accepted the position without protest. Lipscombe, who seemed to think she might be somehow essential to the bicyclist's departure, was told she need not wait up, and went to bed. Then the two ladies were left to themselves to have a short chat more before parting.

Nancy had got a very thoughtful look upon her, with her grave frank eyes on the fire, as though something she wanted to know lay hid there. Mrs. Carteret acquiesced in silence when she did not break it, and seemed to find the sight of her young friend a distraction from the tension of her thoughts, for she still kept looking at her. Presently she said—"Yes—what?" not in

response to anything her companion had said, but to an inflection of countenance that looked like speech.

"Only," said Nancy, slowly and something doubtfully. She ended abruptly:—"Only something I was going to say."

"Well—what was it?"

"If I had said it, it would have been . . ."

"Would have been what?"

"But, you see, I changed my mind and didn't say it. I'm not sure that I ought to."

"I can't tell without knowing what it would have been."

"It's only an idea, you know."

"All right. Go on."

"Mr. Snaith is engaged to Miss Lucy Hinchliffe."

"Suppose he is!" Mrs. Carteret looked amused and puzzled.

"We know he is, don't we? Well, that girl could wheedle anything out of me. She could wheedle the clothes off my back." The speaker felt that this was at least inartistic, and hastened to adjust its accuracy. "Only mine are too large for her. She's smaller than I am."

Mrs. Carteret laughed outright, for the first time. "Mr. Snaith," said she, "isn't such a susceptible young chap as you are! Why, my child, do you suppose that any sensible man of the world, in Snaith's position, would allow a little monkey like that to twist him round her finger?"

Nancy nodded several times, with gravity. "She could *me*," she said. "Why not him?—when he's in love with her, all square!"

"Are you in love with her all zigzag? Or how?"

Nancy dwelt on the problem a moment before answering:—"It doesn't work out that way," said she evasively.

Mrs. Carteret gave serious thought to the main question. "I'm sure you're wrong, Nancy dear," she said. "Unless Fred-eric asked him to talk to her about it, he would hold his tongue. He was bound in honour to do so."

Nancy seemed to have a violent fit of insight upon her. She said:—"Fred wouldn't ask him to talk to her about it—why should he? But if he asked Fred if he might, Fred would be weak, and say yes. Men are like that—they cave out." She had a very low opinion of male stability. Her friend only laughed at her, and said she was nonsensical. But she was right all the time.

Still though Mrs. Carteret discredited Nancy's conclusions, she was amused at her positiveness, and seemed to find a pleasure in

wondering what new perversity was hatching in that foolish young brain. She went back to a chance of conversation that had almost become prehistoric—anyhow, the Bagster Sutcliffes had happened since—and wanted to know what some thought was that Nancy had kept to herself. It was an elusive thing to ask after, and she had to consider what was possible. She decided on:—"What was it that wasn't a coal?"

Nancy had not the slightest idea what this meant, and thought it was a conundrum. She said:—"Now, don't hurry me, and perhaps I shall guess it. I hate giving them up."

"What can the child mean?" said Mrs. Carteret. Then, suddenly enlightened:—"Oh, I see! No, I'm not asking you a riddle, dear! I mean before those plaguy people came. You said an idea came into your head. What was the idea?"

Nancy looked very uncomfortable. Another girl would have said she had forgotten the idea. And it must be admitted that most folks would consider one had a prerogative of oblivion of one's own ideas—for are they not one's own, if anything is? But by this time she had remembered both the coal and the context. And it was equally impossible to reveal the idea and—for her, she being herself—to fabricate evasions. So she said:—"Dear Mrs. Carteret, would you mind my not telling you what it was? I would so *much* rather not." Why—of course! But Mrs. Carteret was very curious, for all that.

This must have been about half-past ten o'clock. And though Nancy talked very big about her recklessness of riding in the dark, she knew her family would begin to be uneasy before midnight. She could not understand why they should be more uneasy after midnight than after midday. But one has to accept one's family as it has been supplied by Nature.

So as a preliminary thin end of the wedge, she said it must be getting late. To which her hostess replied that it couldn't be really late yet. They talked of lateness as if it was a quality the Hours acquired with Time, a bouquet as of wine in the bin. In deference to the intrinsic impossibility of their having developed this bouquet, neither looked at her watch; and that clock was wrong, said the owner. Nevertheless, it was evident that belief in this impossibility was only skin-deep, from the creeping in of peroration, insidiously. They harked back on leading topics, and showed a tendency to wind them up. They arranged a visit to The Cedars—going over premises was always a fascinating employment!—although Mrs. Carteret was satisfied that it was the veriest castle-in-the-air, and would come to nothing.

Then they supposed that the lovers had been blest in one another's company, and remarked that if they quarrelled half a dozen times a day it did not matter, provided they ended on a reconciliation. Mrs. Carteret expressed confidence in her son's stability. She knew that in his professional departures he had shown—well, one ought to call it perhaps a lack of concentration, but this applied only to his intellectual life. Where the heart was concerned he was stability itself. She believed this, evidently, and Nancy said:—"Oh yes!" Then they used the fag-end of their day's intercourse for a serious addendum about the shadow that was darkening the time for one of them directly, for the other by sympathy, making the most of any possible light behind the cloud.

"I will write the moment we hear anything," said Mrs. Carteret. "Indeed, I'm not sure I won't telegraph. I shall if it's good."

"Oh do!—it would be so nice of you. You'll see, you'll have to telegraph."

"I shall hope to. But oh dear—how the time will keep on going! It's three weeks already. I sometimes feel quite sick."

"Three weeks is *nothing*," Nancy put plenty of emphasis into this; she was not going in for encouragement by halves. "People have disappeared for months and years, from all sorts of causes, and turned up all right in the end." All the same, the young lady was not sorry she was not called on to give instances. She may even have risen to the necessity for going in order to avoid doing so. "I really *must* be off," she said; and then added, laughing:—"I feel exactly like the What's-their-names—Bagster Sutcliffes."

Then followed a short interregnum of lamp-lighting and preparation, and she was off, and Mrs. Carteret felt painfully alone. But Fred would be back soon. She was going to sit up for him.

If this lady had known how many of the items of that last postscript of chat with her young friend were destined to be thwarted or falsified in the near future . . .! But there!—if we were all prophets, would Life be worth living? What is its value now, even with a curtain ahead that our imaginations may run riot behind, and Hope always at hand to give them a lift?

CHAPTER XII

MRS. CARTERET almost wished that the little dachshund's subterfuge had succeeded, so lonely did the place feel after she had watched the bicyclist's lamp turn the first corner, and heard the last audible exclamation of her son. Also after she had admitted that it was a fine night. This was to the night policeman on his beat, who had seemed interested in the bicycle, and turned his bull's-eye on it. She returned his good-night, and went indoors. Yes, Liebig would not have been unwelcome in the empty drawing-room, although the callous egotism of his nature was not suggestive of sympathy.

Fred might be very late. She knew the extraordinary elasticity of the times of trains, and that lateness was only an official quality of a penultimate train, that might safely be ignored by a gentleman who, as it were, knew railways at home. For the engineering firm that had been Fred's *alma mater* was deeply in the confidence of railways. All that she could rely upon was that the Fraser family would retire to bed at twelve, at the latest. So she should make up her mind to see nothing of her son till one, at the earliest. She would write letters, presently. For the time being, she would think over this girl and her ways. She confessed to herself that she was getting very much attached to her.

How very superior to her sister she was! Why on earth need Fred go and fall in love with Cintra, when it was so obviously wiser for him—for any man—to fall in love with Nancy? But that was just like men. Any frivolous chit, with a pretty face—she did not deny the prettiness—had all mankind at her feet, while girls with hearts and souls and lives and purposes simply went to the wall. Of course she could not be sure, yet-awhile, about this Nancy girl. But she certainly had a very good impression of her. She was not going to admit to herself that she was inclined to love her.

As for that explosion of the sister against the other girl—Mr. Snaith's girl—it was simply an outburst of unreasoning jealousy, and if that was the sort of thing Fred had to expect all that she could say was that she was bitterly sorry for him. After all, it was not as if she herself had not been in the room

all the time and seen everything that took place. Jealousy of that sort was no proof of affection, but rather the contrary. At least, it was a confession of entire absence of confidence in her lover. Would the thing last? We should see. At any rate, she should say nothing. One always did more harm than good by meddling, in things of this sort.

She should show that paragraph in the newspaper to Fred as soon as he came in. It could do no serious harm. But it was very mysterious. It could never have been written by anyone who had a first-hand knowledge of the matters it referred to; and was, in fact, newsmongering on the face of it. Some penny-a-liner's work. As for that dear crazy-pated girl's dream, that it resulted from some indiscreet utterance of Mr. Snaith—what an idea! A breach of confidence by the Lord Chancellor!

Well—she was a crazy-pated girl! What was her idea that wasn't coal? Mrs. Carteret smiled as she remembered the earnest hazel eyes, waiting for permission for their owner to be silent. "*Would I mind her not telling?*" She would so *much* rather not." She repeated the words, and the smile died of an effort to remember what topic had provoked this thought she was so unwilling to tell. It was before those tiresome visitor people came. She was then guilty, the story feels, of an unfair and illiberal semi-comment, half-aloud:—"The Bagster Sutcliffes, indeed!" Now if these people had not been named thus, they would have had some other name.

Yes, she had recollected the moment of the coal. But what on earth were they talking about then? If she could get at that, conjecture would have a chance of a glimpse into that dear crazy mind. But her effort of memory, after all, led nowhere. For she was sure that, at that exact moment, she had been speaking about what her own mother had said to her, years and years ago, about that love-affair of her brother-in-law, before ever she herself was married. It was not about *that*?—one might be pretty sure! What should Nancy Fraser have ideas for, especially ideas she wouldn't tell, about a thing of no interest to her, that happened before she was born or in contemplation? Quite out of the question!

But this rejection of the thing as impossible was to set her thinking on the subject it related to. She got well back in a dream of the past, to be roused from it by the sudden clang of a pull at her own gate-bell.

What was that? Surely not Fred back again already! How could it be, when he had his own key, as well as a latchkey for

the door? It was needed, for at night the gate was fastened. She knew! It was that night-latch out of order. To be sure! But how came he to be so early? It was not much past eleven.

She heard one of the servants moving, to go down and open the gate. But she was too curious to know what had brought him with such double-quick speed, to wait for a sleepy hand-maiden to get "things on," and was out of the house first. But it was not Fred. She found that out before she reached the gate. People were outside, talking; but seriously, not trivially—talking *about* something. It must be a mistake. Probably the wrong house.

"What is it? This is number seventeen." She felt so sure her surmise was correct, that she anticipated action upon it.

Then she heard a man's voice say:—"It's all right as I told you. That's the lady's voice."

She threw the gate open instantly, and saw a face she had seen before that evening, the policeman who had bull's-eyed Nancy's bicycle when she left the gate twenty minutes since. And beyond him something dark and covered on a stretcher.

A young man, approaching quickly, said:—"Not out here. Get her into the house." To which someone made answer:—"Right you are, doctor! Fetch up your end, Sam!" Whereupon the something travelled through the garden and into the entrance lobby.

The whole world had become a stunning boom in her head, accompanied by a strange consciousness that it had got to subside. It was the knowledge that a decision was wanted as to where the something should be carried that roused her to articulate speech. That climb up the stairs must be avoided if possible. Now, there was a bedroom on the ground floor, which was Fred's when needed, or anyone's in his absence. Into this she directed the bearers. Dared she followed them?

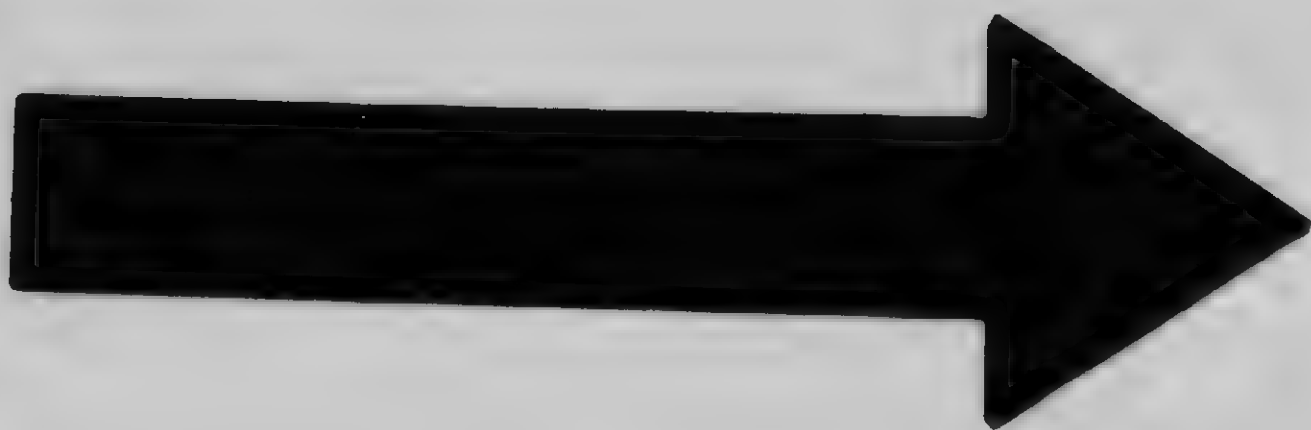
Yes, after a pause of a moment to help her against her head. It was her enemy. The moment was longer than she thought, for when she mustered courage to enter, it was into a mysterious smell like ether with a young doctor in his shirt sleeves in it, who was saying:—"I can tell you she's not dead. That's all for the present, and that's enough." Then, hearing that, her head cleared, and she became herself. "I am all right now," she said to the doctor. "It was only at first. Now tell me everything."

"I can't find any fracture," said he. And it was then she became aware how long that moment must have been. For he continued:—"I have made all the examination possible, and I

hope it's no more than a bad concussion. If so, she may be all right to-morrow. But it's my duty to tell you that we can't be sure the spine isn't injured." It then appeared that this doctor could not stay, but that someone of the household had been sent to summon, if possible, her regular medical attendant, to take over the case; and also, if possible, to get a prescription made up, in spite of the late hour. He himself had been just returning home from a patient, when he had chanced upon the accident, and seeing it was a matter of urgency, had submitted to detention. "I know I am wanted at home," said he, "or I would have stayed on. But it wouldn't be any good, as far as doing anything goes. I'm sure there are no bones broken. She came down on her head. . . . I saw the fall, you know." No—she did not know. How was it? He gave particulars. The young lady's own riding was in perfect order; right side of the way, sounding her bell, and so forth. The cart that collided with her had swung round a corner close to the kerb on its right, and swerving to avoid it, she had struck the kerbstone and fallen full on her head on the pavement. "I saw the fall clearly," said he, "and the left shoulder's all right. She could have been hurt nowhere else, except the spine. I don't anticipate anything, but, as I said, we can't tell."

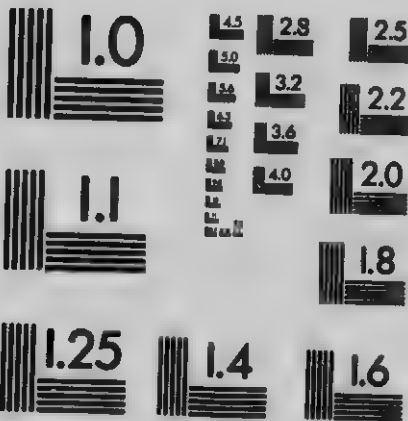
Mrs. Carteret, quite overwhelmed at first by this new trouble, was beginning to collect her faculties. "How did you find out where to bring her?" said she. This was soon explained. A policeman had identified the bicycle by the red leather wallet, which he had seen as the rider was leaving a house in Maida Vale—this house in fact. Then Mrs. Carteret could trace each event, as it happened. Her dear girl had only got the length of a policeman's beat from the house, at the very outside, when this accursed cart, with its probably drunken driver, had stopped her bicycling for months—for years—for ever perhaps. This was all the evil anticipation she felt strong enough to bear, now. At all forecasting of a fatal end, thought shrunk back shuddering and was silent.

She was not overclear, afterwards, about any of these happenings, but she remembered about this time that she felt sick, and could no longer endure to keep gazing at the motionless figure on the bed, with its terrible white suggestion of death on the face. She left the room, for a moment's freedom from it, meaning to return immediately. But outside were the household, untidy in extemporised costume, hungry for news, each one on the watch to claim credit for some service rendered, having



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rendered none. She made a show—a poor one—of a favourable report, for encouragement; and while the better, or human, side of the female domestic was glad, the sensational side was baffled and disappointed. It revived, however, when Lipscombe returned with Dr. Culpepper, the tutelary Galen of Maida Vale, who said:—"Sorry to hear of the accident, Mrs. Carteret. Your maid told me. Let's see the patient," and passed into the bedroom.

He and the other doctor seemed acquaintances. "You saw the fall, Harrison?" said he, and the other told about it in an undertone. "You're sure about the shoulder," he went on, and the answer was:—"Absolutely certain." Dr. Culpepper then said, addressing Mrs. Carteret:—"I think you may rely on that. Mr. Harrison is a very strong man in surgery. I consider his opinion better than my own. I shall not examine the shoulder myself. . . . Unless you wish it, of course?" But Mrs. Carteret had no wish, either way.

Then Mr. Harrison went, and a nurse came, somehow arranged for by Dr. Culpepper. And all the while the motionless figure on the bed, that was Nancy Fraser, showed no sign of life. But neither nurse nor doctors seemed alarmed at that. Then, when all seemed settled, Dr. Culpepper went away also, and Mrs. Carteret went out at the front door into the clear starlight night.

Those stars should by now have seen her girl's arrival at home. How little they cared! And at that home of hers, how they would wonder when Nancy would be back, and invent new possibilities to account for the delay in her arrival. She could fancy the panic-stricken voice of the brother or sister who had settled not to wait up, but to go to bed and sleep, catching in a waking moment some sound of speech below, and calling to the watchers:—"Isn't Nancy come in yet?" She knew how the father or brother would come post-haste in the morning, before any telegram she could send could reach them, to learn what sombre news she had to give. Oh, if only consciousness had returned by then, what a gain that would be!

She went back restlessly, and packed the household off to bed, telling them what was not true, that there had been signs of consciousness in the patient. This was that they might sleep. But her solicitude for them was quite uncalled for. *They* would have slept—trust them for that! She talked a little with the nurse, but found her depressing, as she destroyed the value of her sanguineness about the return of consciousness before morning, by dwelling on the probability of secondary consequences

to follow. "You get lockjaw, as often as not," she said. And she had known creeping paralysis to set in after the patient had been credited with complete recovery. So Mrs. Carteret, after detecting, or fancying she detected, some sign of returning colour in the pallid face, and then condemning her own hope as futile, again left the room and went uneasily down the garden path to the gate, and stood watching along the road for Fred, as people do for late comers overdue, knowing all the while how little they gain by doing so.

But Fred *was* overdue—no doubt of that! That was one o'clock—and that—and that! They were all of a mind, from her own clock in the hall, heard through the door she had left open, to deliberate Big Ben at remote Westminster, showing how the east wind was veering south. She wished he would come; his presence would be a great help. . . . There was a cab stopping. That would be him!

It was *not* him. It was an indignant hoarse gentleman, who roared to his cabman:—"I *told* you Acacia Road—where are you going?" She heard the cabman's reply:—"You git more riding for your money this way, anyhow!" as he pulled up and turned down a plausible road. Then the hoarse gentleman's growls died down in the distance.

The policeman coming slowly along the pavement was the same policeman, still on his beat. She waited for him. He might tell her something.

She thought he was not going to speak, and indeed he all but passed the gate, without doing so. But he turned square and faced her, to say:—"A serious job, ma'am, I'm afraid;" and waited for confirmation or contradiction.

"Serious—yes! But the doctors say she is only stunned, and will most likely come to in an hour or two." Her words sounded hopeful to herself, but she mistrusted them.

"Well—maybe they'll be right. It was a bad fall, they said round at the accident."

"You didn't actually see it, then?" She had thought he did.

"It happened before I come up. The doctor saw it—the young gentleman."

"So he told me. You knew her again. It was lucky."

"I might not have known her. Young ladies run of a muchness. Sometimes you can't tell 'em apart. But the marocker knapsack I went by. There couldn't have been two such, not in a short half-mile."

"What would have happened if you had not recognised her?"

"They'd have identified her at the infirmary, and communicated."

"Suppose she had had nothing on her to identify her?"

"That does happen, now and again. Then they have to keep 'em pending enquiry. If a bicyclist rides without his card in his pocket he's the responsible party himself—it's his own lookout, and he knows what to expect." This policeman had renounced all human interests, and had devoted his whole soul to Responsibility.

No sign of Fred! Mrs. Carteret said good-right to the policeman and returned into the house. It was just possible that Fred, if made very late by some unforeseen cause, might go straight to his chambers and sleep there—just possible, but not very likely. It was rather a device of her mind to shelve a new anxiety, than a reasonable conviction.

She and the nurse stood together by the motionless figure on the bed. . . . Yes—quite motionless, but . . . !

The room was half darkened—one gas-jet only—a glimmer accented, no more. Mrs. Carteret said:—"I want more light to see the face. Is there any objection?"

The nurse replied, through a palpable yawn:—"None that I know of. . . . No—none whatever!" The correction was a struggle or a protest against the cause of the yawn. She went to the gas bracket, and turned the tap cautiously. "Rather more please!" said Mrs. Carteret, watching the patient. The gaslight went up, hissed remonstrance, and was checked. "Come here," she continued, "and look!" The nurse came, and looked. "Yes," she said, "I see what you mean." It was a change in the colour; little enough, but something!

"I thought so," said Mrs. Carteret. "But it might have been mere hope." She felt as if a great lump of lead had been suddenly lifted from her heart. And then an intense impatience to hear the girl's dear voice again. "Will it be long, do you think?" said she.

"Will what?" said the nurse. "Oh—you mean consciousness? No—yes. . . . Well, it may be some time."

"Do you means hours, or days?"

"Do I mean . . . ? Oh—hours or days?" But this nurse's testimony was worth little or nothing. She was breaking down fast before the most irresistible of logicians, Sleep—him against whom all conclusions may be tried in vain.

Mrs. Carteret saw what was the matter, and went straight to the point. "You have been awake too long," she said.

"Only thirty-six hours," said the nurse.

"Exactly. They shouldn't have sent you. You're not the least fit for night-work."

"They had no one else to send. I should not have come only it was for Dr. Culpepper. I wasn't the least sleepy when I started."

Mrs. Carteret considered the position. "I think," she said, "the best thing will be for you to lie down and go to sleep. I could not sleep if I tried, and I can wake you if necessary." But she did not feel very confident on the last point.

There was a sofa at hand, in an off-room; and upon it, in a very few minutes, was a sleeper to all appearance beyond the reach of any rousing power less decisive than that of the hot iron with which the Oriental keeps his victim awake till he dies raving mad. Mrs. Carteret left her without any anticipation of needing her services, and returned to the bedroom.

The figure on the bed had not moved. The hand lay on the coverlid where she had seen it last. But before turning down the gas she made sure of that returning colour in the face, and the fingers she took in hers to feel for a revival of the pulse were warmer—or, rather, less cold.

As for the pulse, that she could not be certain about. But finding of pulses was not one of her strong points. She had an inner conviction they never occurred twice in the same place. But she fancied, after many trials, that her finger was conscious of intervals, though it would have been absurd to say that they were separated by beats. Well—patience! All might be well, in a few hours.

There was no fear that sleep would overcome *her*, with those dry burning eyes. Besides, she seldom slept in the early hours of the night as it was, and was in no want of sleep; had overslept last night. She settled down on an easy-chair close to the bed, without misgiving. As the silence grew she could hear the regular breathing of that unhappy nurse, whom she was sincerely sorry for. It was much better to have acknowledged the position, as she had done, than to have that unhappy woman struggling all night against a *force majeure*.

She had made up her mind by now that Fred had gone back to his chambers, and had no disposition to beg and borrow a trouble about that young man. The fact was, he was always very easy about his comings and goings, and this defection of his would hardly have called for notice at another time. Moreover, the presence of her young friend counted as a set-off or

makeweight. Fred would have come back early enough for a chat before retiring had he not known she was not alone. This was the substance of the excuse she concocted to cover her son's absence. But it had its weak points, and she was subconscious of them. Fred *ought* to have been back; there was no doubt of it.

Is one alive, ever, to more than one pain, or bad anxiety, at a time? So Mrs. Carteret asked herself, when she felt the old wound return, as the balm of revived hope began to operate on the new one. Nancy would be all right—or was she only catching at a straw? Anyhow, she *had* to live, and hope she *must*, in self-defence! But the black cloud came back and back, all the worse for her short oblivion of it.

Where *was* he, this brother of her dead husband—this man who through a lifetime, or the most of it, had been her first refuge, and his, in all the cross-currents of life; whose pilotage had always been at hand in unsafe water? Had she paid him his due of love, or even reverence, in all these years of his helpfulness; accepted as of right, sometimes even with a trace of resentment against his prepotent exaction of deference to his opinion? Her thought of him fell short of taking form, but might have become:—"Dear, dear old Dru!—how overbearing you were! What a drill-sergeant! What an Amurath, almost!" But only the first phrase stirred in her mind. For, where was he now?

Her thought had to rush up its reserves, to stand against despair. And the chief one was a sort of mechanical derision of herself, for taking the worst for granted; partly of herself at least, at the bidding of a distempered fancy—an unwholesome nightmare of the small hours, and a memory of it in the healthier daylight. It would be no miracle, if he walked into this house to-morrow, denouncing the fatuity which had ended in that fool's paragraph in the newspaper. As if he did not know how to take care of himself! She could almost hear the words he would be sure to use, and the tones of that familiar voice.

But . . . where *was* he, now? That terrible image of a hidden victim of murder would force itself before her; or rather, would force itself into the image of a railway line that stretched from her consciousness of Wimbledon or her consciousness of Exeter—she had never been free from either—with an ill-searched margin on either side. And then again she found herself in revolt against this incorrigible pessimism, to again allow her indignation against herself to collapse, and be renewed for

a new nightmare after a brief spell of resolution. She said to herself again and again that all this wear and tear of the soul was needless; would be mere food for regret in the future if all turned out well in the end, as might be—yes, as *might* be! Why be blind to the possibility of good?

After all, that wild surmise of Fred's might have *something* in it. It would not be the first extravagant theory that had turned out sane. She took it up for serious examination.

All that first condemnation of it had been on the score of its improbability, not impossibility. It was not impossible that he could treasure, in his secret heart, a love he had never confessed, even though his rival were dead and gone, for any term of years. Why not? She could fancy a hundred motives that might work upon a nature like his, that, for all the roughness of its outer shell, was chivalry itself at the core. Who could say that mere reverence for a possibility in this lady's mind—the possibility of a disbelief in any but physical death, except indeed for the man who destroys his own soul—might not influence him to keep silence? If he said to himself:—"How can I, who am officially bound to condemn materialism, ask to enter the temple sacred to no mere memory, but to belief in present survival beyond the tomb?" If he said this, and acted on it or disallowed action on it, would it have been anything one would not have foretold of a man of his antecedents? Surely too, if, as was likely, he took her mother completely into his confidence on this point, it was one that would have warranted her emphatic rejection of every effort towards a resuscitation of his dream of former years. Otherwise what could justify her statement, almost angry in its positiveness, that the thing was impossible—absolutely *impossible*? So far from being a refutation of this thing, the fact that her mother had spoken thus was a confirmation of it. Her emphasis only showed how completely she had understood his feelings and been in his confidence.

Then supposing this view of his prolonged silence accepted, where was the difficulty of accounting for his possible disclosure of his old passion in the end? Consider the difference that would have been made by half a word, half a hint, from the lady herself! And as for the inexplicable privacy of the step he had taken, whatever it was, would he be his own master? Would he not have to consult his confederate in everything? Certainly, her wish for secrecy would be odd, and she would be an odd woman. But why should she not be an odd woman? Some singular thing was wanted, to account for the facts. Why

not an eccentric desire 'or a private wedding on the part of a lady absolutely unknown? Besides, what was there to show that a letter had not miscarried?

She went on to construct a meshwork of imaginary circumstances that would account for everything, beginning at the moment when he caught his train at Wimbledon. There was no strain on probability in supposing that he met the lady by the way. She might be travelling in the same carriage, but dramatic contexts would have to be devised to make such a meeting serve the end in view, that of a prolonged interview, leading to a revival of an old cordial acquaintance. A much more probable contingency would be, for instance, that he should recognise her on the platform of a side station, seeing a friend off. Then that an occurrence should ensue such as we have almost all known to happen, if it has not happened to ourselves. He left the train heedlessly, moved by an irresistible impulse to speak with her on the platform, and perhaps, over-confident that the guard would give him time, come what might, to resume his place before starting. She could imagine the "Jump in there—just off!" of the guard, and his run after his own brake; his hanging on its step long enough to see the big clerical gentleman fail to reach his carriage; his "Very sorry, Sir—couldn't wait!" to the latter as he swept past him at too great a speed to risk inviting him in—a younger man would have been different—and in the end the humiliating confession that that was the very last train; and he would have to go to an hotel. Does not all this happen every day?

She found the possible lady, in some side locker of Fancy, and brought her out to act her part. An interesting looking woman in deep widow's weeds—Heaven knows why, as her widowhood was come of age by hypothesis!—and preferably an appearance of having suffered much. Such a one could fairly scout the idea of the hotel, and invite Dr. Carteret to take advantage of her hospitality; that was her brougham, and it was less than half an hour's drive; he could go on to Exeter by the ten-thirty in the morning, and really lose very little time. . . . Well—yes! On the whole a grown-up daughter would be desirable, and would cost nothing.

Mrs. Carteret's imagination provided a chubby one, just out of her teens, who had often heard mamma say she knew Dr. Carteret years ago. . . . And so on.

The moment she saw a possible *dénouement* ahead, she was contented to leave events to develop themselves. All she wanted

this fiction for was to fortify, as an example, her belief that other possibilities existed, any one of which might lie at the root of the mystery. She took kindly to it in itself too. Such a sweet St. Luke's summer of happiness for the old boy himself after a life so cruelly frustrated. But the principle point was that it was absurd to give up hope, when so many ways of evading despair were open to imagination.

What a strange thing it was—the story is still following Mrs. Carteret's thoughts—that in those early days, which she could still remember well, when she and her dear dead husband, little more than a boy, were revelling in their early dream of love, and caring not a straw how others lived and died, this young divine, her destined brother-in-law, should be hiding a grievous sorrow at heart from all the world! Why—she could remember him, rather, as uniformly cheerful; his future self concealed, one might have said, in the mere strength and freshness of his youth. For though family jests nicknamed him the inflexible One, and Rhadamanthus, those who coined them never knew their truth. Even her husband never saw his brother as the man that he became. She could not say to herself that he would not have recognised him ten years later, but he certainly would have been surprised at the change.

When did it begin? It must have been about that time; the time, that is, of those terrible days that changed her life and left it lonesome. Or, it may be, rather later. It is impossible to recall the successive phases of a change of character. All she could be sure of was that the brother-in-law she remembered in her husband's lifetime had become a different man a few years after his death. She could remember her mother noticing this change, and speaking of it.

However confident one may be of one's power to keep awake, it will be put through a severe trial by circumstances such as those which surrounded Mrs. Carteret at this small hour of the morning, one which in itself makes vigilance almost impossible. That heavy breathing in the next room, with its constant new resolutions towards some still lower depth of consciousness, was her worst enemy. What watcher has not felt the malign influence of example? But for that ineffectual nurse, she was sure she never would have closed an eye, and indeed was inclined to resent the idea she had. But then, you cannot wake with a start, and say:—"What?—Who spoke?" unless you have been asleep. Moreover, the eldest Miss Bagster Sutcliffe was not in

the room two minutes ago. *She* would have been a dream, even if she had not been smoking.

But who was it that spoke? That must have been part of the dream. Because though the gas, turned up, showed on the face of the insensible girl on the bed more colour than three hours ago, she remained motionless. Surely such a glare would have been enough to rouse her. However, there could be no reasonable doubt of the meaning of the colour. It was a good omen.

It made the watch r's mind happier. She went back to her chair to decide at leisure what attitude she ought to take up about the nurse, who had not come here simply to sleep, after all. But *what* a sleep to spoil! Listen to it.

Suppose she gave her till four o'clock! The woman had a right to be called, clearly. It might be Samaritan to let her have her sleep out, but it wasn't business. She herself would be the first to ask why she was not roused. So be it—at four o'clock.

Mrs. Carteret felt like Fate, sitting there watching the long hand of the clock on the chimney-piece. Unlike Fate, she had misgivings more than once that the hand had stopped. It always hung fire, surely, at each five minutes' end, and seemed reluctant to cross the open. But then, it made a rush. She felt that this illusion—for it could be nothing else—had a kind of languid interest for her. . . . There now!—in five minutes more, the nurse!

There was a fire in the grate, lighted at the request of the young doctor when the room was first settled on, but never much encouraged, since the weather was getting warmer. It would not do to let it out now, in the coldest part of the night. Mrs. Carteret rescued it from extinction, but in doing so made a noise with the fire-shovel which clashed with some other sound, and spoiled her hearing of it.

She paused, shovel in hand, and spoke through the open door to the nurse:—"Yes—I was just coming to wake you. It's four o'clock."

But it was not the nurse, it was the patient. Mrs. Carteret, uncertain which, for the moment, relinquished the fire-shovel with a noiseless caution, and listened.

A moment after she was at the bedside, trying to catch speech barely articulate, and repeating it for the speaker to confirm or contradict her hearing of it. "Yes, dear child, 'the man in the cart with one eye'—yes!—'on the wrong side'—of course he was! 'We shall catch him if we're sharp about it?' . . .

Oh, you poor dear darling girl—just fancy! Why—it all happened hours ago! . . . What happened? Why, you were thrown off your bike and I very nearly killed, and brought back here five hours ago."

"I thought it was five minutes. Where is 'here'? I thought I was at home." For, as is commonly the case, the hours of insensibility had been a blank.

"Here" is Maida Vale, and I am Mrs. Carteret—Fred's mother, you know." A misgiving crossed her mind that she herself had been forgotten. She had heard of such cases.

"I know. We were talking here a few minutes ago. Only I don't see the use of trying to open my eyes. Don't believe I could. Oh dear! I'm all head and such a weight. . . . I say—would you look and see if my watch is going. On my wrist."

"They've taken it off, dear," said Mrs. Carteret, feeling the wrist. For the low gaslight showed scarcely anything.

"Do please find it, and make sure. . . . Oh dear, what a lot of trouble I am giving!"

"Never mind. Give more."

"All right. I say—I want something cool, to drink. Only I'm not sure I can sit up to drink it. Perhaps my head won't come up off the pillow."

"Don't try—stupid girl! I've got something." So she had, an invalid's feeding-bottle with an elastic tube. "I can give you nothing better than cold tea," said she.

The tea was a bit of forethought of the cook's and turned out luckily. Nancy seemed to appreciate it, and said it felt like being in a perambulator.

But the hand that Mrs. Carteret had explored for the watch had felt quite hot, to her surprise, so recently had it been quite cold, and a riotous pulse had insisted on being taken notice of in the wrist as she touched it. Fever has ungoverned impulses. She turned up the gas for a moment and was startled at the flush that had come suddenly. She must wake the nurse now; she was not familiar enough with this sort of thing not to be alarmed by it.

But she hesitated, because how was she to account for the nurse? Would it not be better to pause at least until she saw her way plainer? If the nurse had not had a professional manner, and a costume, she could have palmed her off as—as what? Well, as somebody else. But no veil could be thrown over that identity. She must wait until the patient slept: or

the nurse woke spontaneously, for that might give a chance of consultation. Even then, tact would be needed to save the situation. Had that nurse any? Has any nurse any?

As she wavered Nancy spoke. "Mrs. Carteret dear!" said she. "I want you to go to bed. It's perfectly ridiculous your stopping up. I shall be all right. Talking hurts my head a little, but it's all right when I don't talk. *Do go to bed.*"

Mrs. Carteret turned the gas up again, and to her thinking the colour in the face was less. Had she fancied it, or was this a natural change under the circumstances? She took the hand again, and it seemed less hot, and the pulse quieter. Yes—that was what it was! Excited imagination on her part. Was it strange that it should be so, after all the tension of the last few weeks?

"Look here, Nancy dear," said she. "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll just sit here till I think you're asleep again, and then I'll go to bed and send one of them to be handy if you want anything. There now! Won't that do?"

"Yes—if you promise. Honest Injun and no cheating!" Whereupon Mrs. Carteret turned down the gas and resumed her armchair by the fire.

But she was not on her guard against one contingency of her position. A state of anxious tension like hers may make its subject venomously sleepless, but if one cause of that tension is removed reaction may set in. It did in her case, and even while she was listening to hear the regular breath of sleep from the patient, an insidious drowsiness was upon her, which took no notice of her intention to ignore it in a minute or two, and wafted her would-be-watchful senses into a dreamland.

Some believe that the soundest sleeper may be awakened by the announcement, even in a whisper, of some news vital to himself whether it be very good or very bad, however little he may grasp its meaning. If this belief is well grounded, it may account for the fact that an hour later—earlier than one might have anticipated—Mrs. Carteret woke with a start, to catch words spoken by the patient; dream-speech certainly, but clear and unmistakable in the morning silence for all that. They came as the end of a sentence.

"... And all the while she was the girl herself!" What could that mean? Mrs. Carteret was quite unconscious of any feeling but bare curiosity. The words *must* be connected with something actual, yesterday or earlier. Who was the girl? Not

the youngest Miss Bagster Sutcliffe, surely? Certainly not one of the elder ones. The name "girl" sat awkwardly on either.

There was the feverish voice again, not so articulate this time. A sound of earnest reasoning in it—remonstrance with someone, for incredulity! "You wouldn't say 'stuff' if you knew. . . . Stupid!" Mrs. Carteret felt that the dream-talk was to a sister, from the manner of it. Sisters talk like this to one another. But why Cintra, the only possible sister in this case, should be denounced as stupid she could not guess. At this moment nothing was further from her mind than the fact that she herself was the girl referred to.

Nor might she ever have been any the wiser if Nancy's feverish utterances had stopped there; for nothing, so far, connected them with herself. It was when, after incoherencies too disconnected to tempt interpretation, the sleeper said with startling distinctness:—"Her brother-in-law, Goosey! How could he?" that the light began to break in upon her. Even then, the effect of the first gleam was only to make her aware that some wild speculation was afoot in her young friend's mind, connecting the vanished man with her own life in a perfectly absurd and unjustifiable way.

Now, when this dear foolish bicyclist was up and well again, as she *would* be—yes, that was good!—would it be possible to repeat this nonsense to her and try for an explanation of it? Then she remembered how Nancy had begged off giving any particulars of the idea that wasn't a coal. She would do the same thing next time.

Hush!—there she was talking again. "Hush" meant: "Stop speculating and listen!" Mrs. Carteret did as she was bid—by some inner consciousness.

It was very difficult to make out, this! Who was it that was a widow herself, *then*, with such a stress upon the *then*? Was it her own self, or was it that of the interesting widow whom inner consciousness suddenly dubbed "the railway-station lady," before it had time to intercept and *unthink* her? Never mind! She would do as well as another to hang thought on; a kind of jury widow, so to speak, for imagination to sail under. Mrs. Carteret listened on, in hopes of hearing more, but speech became mere wandering, and she lost clue of any meaning. It seemed as if that soothing draught was acting up to its name, for the confused dream-speech fled before it, and the patient slept. Very

soon the nurse might be summoned. But a few minutes more would be on the safe side.

Who was "a widow herself," and when was "then"? She was very hazy about anything in the past few hours. But she did recollect that when she identified the moment of the coal, but a short while since, she had dismissed the connection of Nancy's idea, that wasn't the coal, with her own thought at that moment, as untenable and absurd. Was it absurd? Here was the child talking about her brother-in-law!

Then an uneasy feeling crossed her mind and grew, that she would rather *not* know this idea of Nancy's. Unless indeed she could be sure that the widow referred to was the railway station lady, or her mother—that was a possibility? . . . or indeed anyone except herself! It if was she that was the widow herself, her mind flinched from any further knowledge of Nancy's speculations, and courted ignorance. But ignorance, with a constant itching to find out its subject, was one thorn more to vex her mind. Indifference to the unknown is a *sine qua non* to the real article.

Fear to look in the face a fact that one half-knows is lurking round the corner is unendurable for any length of time. One *must* see it, and make the worst or the best of it, as may be. After a short period of flinching, Mrs. Carteret saw that what she suspected might come to nothing on examination, but would remain at its worst half-known. At least, she must revise the position and find out what had set the girl's mind on these imaginings.

It had begun by Nancy's asking her about that early love-affair of Dr. Carteret's and Fred's theories about it. She had thought it better that Nancy should not rely solely on her sister's transfer of Fred's version of it, and had then told the story, as she knew it. After all, what was there to conceal? Nothing.

Further, she remembered that she had given a short shrift to Fred's imaginings of a reappearance of this lady, and a revival of Dr. Carteret's aspirations. But she was a little inclined to blame herself for having given rein to reminiscence, beyond the needs of the occasion, in the presence of this young lass, who, strongly as she was drawn towards her by affection, might not be discretion itself. She recollected repeating aloud, for her own benefit more than for Nancy's, her mother's exact words about this attachment; and especially that last enigmatical saying of hers:—"It would have been all right before her marriage. Now it would be impossible. . . ."

Yes—and it was at that very moment the girl gave such a start and she thought it was the coal. She remembered the explosiveness of that coal, and the look of some new insight on that candid face which betrayed the owner's every thought. It was then that this new idea took possession of her mind, and what provoked it had been those curious words of her mother's, which she indeed had all these years set down as a miscarriage of speech due to paralysis.

And the outcome of it was summed up in the feverish ramblings she had just heard. "She was a widow herself then," and, "Her brother-in-law, Goosey! How could he?" She saw Nancy's "idea" now, plainly. And she saw why the young lady had cried off confession of it.

No wonder she had done so! How look an older woman in the face and say:—"I see now that this man, whom you suppose murdered, had loved you all his life; had kept silence not to cross his younger brother's happiness, and had accepted—with what pain who knows?—the inevitable position of legal consanguinity at his brother's death"? No great wonder, too, that she should have jumped at this false construction of facts, seeing the way in which they had been presented to her!

False construction, of course. Who should know better than she? Was it credible that the grave elder brother—who was a man, mind you, while she was a child!—was enshrining her in his heart of hearts, to the exclusion of every other tenant, while she and his irresponsible junior were indulging in unmitigated romping—for in their case love surprised a mere schoolboy and schoolgirl—and preparing for himself a lonely future in the most painful of circumstances; thirst near the ripple of a forbidden spring, starvation in the very land of plenty? Perfectly incredible! She would have found it out, of course. And she never so much as suspected it.

False construction, of course! But excusable in a bystander who had got the story scrapwise. Mrs. Carteret promised herself that she would tell Nancy, who would be all right again very soon—she was sure of that—plenty of things that would show her the absurdity of her idea, without raking up the whole story again. Now, she must go and wake that sleepy nurse.

CHAPTER XIII

At Lyndhurst, where there was a puzzle-monkey, a minute down the road from The Jessamines, dwelt a retired army officer, Captain Macfarren, whose name so closely resembled Professor Fraser's in the eyes of the post that each frequently received the other's parcels and letters. When this happened of a Saturday night, Macfarren's, being of an obliging disposition, did not wait for the postman on Monday, but just sent round a young man they harboured, with the letter or parcel, and Captain Macfarren's compliments. On this particular Sunday this young man was instructed to carry a wandering parcel to The Jessamines, and ought to have done so in the morning. But he forgot all about it till the evening, and that is why, at nearly eleven o'clock, he was conversing with the young lady at the door she opened to Fred early in the day. Their talk turned on the voices audible in the parlour near at hand.

What the young man said was:—" 'Ouse'old's a keepin' of its temper to-night, to jedge by the sound." To which the young lady replied, following the slight indication of his glance:—" That's our youngest, and the young gentleman she's engaged to be married to. She'll keep him in order, I lay." So the young man's remark had been sarcastic, as also was his comment:—" Wife of his buzzim—that sort of thing!" Then he, very impertinently as the story thinks, gave a personal turn to the conversation. "A 'ansum gal like you," said he, "wouldn't go on like that. Ketch you at it!! Nor you shouldn't set on *my* knee, if you did." The young lady did not seem mortally offended, saying in reproof merely:—" I shan't ask to be took, not if it's *you*!" They parted with equanimity, and the young lady placed the parcel on the hall table where you couldn't easy miss it; and, finding she couldn't make out what the dissension was about, owing to the thickness of the door, vanished into the basement.

Had she remained within hearing, and the speakers been unaware of her, she would have heard, through the door, half ajar for someone to come out, that her young mistress within said:—" Yes—that is what I wish. Good-bye!" And she would have heard that Cintra meant what she said.

Fred was not sure about her real meaning. This was not their first lovers' tiff. She would recant again, as she had done before. So he half said to himself, as he paused at the door. "Cintra!" said he, appealingly. "Think of the meaning of what you say! Is it all to be at an end between us?"

"Yes!" She made this affirmative harsh with emphasis, beyond the needs of its meaning.

"And for such a cause?" He closed the door as he said this, as though to shut in the conversation.

"Are you sure you know the cause?" This was spoken coldly—icily.

"I think I do. At least—it has to do with that house."

"It has nothing to do with the house. I should have said exactly the same of any other house, if . . . if . . ."

"If there had been a proposal to share it with Charley Snaith and his wife?"

"Not with Mr. Snaith and his wife! With Miss Lucy Hinchliffe and her husband! Mr. Snaith indeed! As if Mr. Snaith could make any difference!"

"Why should Lucy Hinchliffe make a difference?" A hesitating question.

"Ask yourself that!" was the unhesitating answer. "You know why, better than I do."

"Oh, Cintra—how can you be so unreasonable! Have I not told you how utterly groundless . . ."

"No—you haven't!" This was unfortunately true. On the other hand, the young lady could scarcely lay claim to having formulated any definite accusation against her lover. How could she have done so, when there was nothing to lay hold of? Has not this been so in many another action in the Court of Love? The gravamen of the indictment has been indisputable, but it has taken the skill of Shakespeare or Browning to frame it.

Fred knew he was technically guiltless, even of a confessed sensibility. But he had given away his case by alleging a plea of not guilty to an accusation he had never heard the terms of. What but consciousness of a crime could prompt a knowledge of its particulars? We all remember, in youth, the overpowering force of a reproachful finger and condemnatory headshake? And the frequent gross injustice of both? But the worst of it was, in this case, that the injustice was not vital enough to satisfy a culprit so truthful as Fred. He knew that the items of Miss Hinchliffe, that have been referred to *ante*, had at least borne favourable comparison—suppose we say—with those dissimilar

ones of his legitimate lady-love, which were now, to say the truth, at their best when anger was evoking a flash from eyes which bore no comparison with the lustrous orbs stocked by her *bête-noire*. It was a thorn in the side of Fred's inner conscience that his admiration of Cintra in a rage took this analogy, of all others, in his acknowledgment of it.

Had he been ready with a convincing protest of undivided passion, Cintra would have met it with a torrent of tears and contrition for her unreasonable jealousy. What girl would not? But this intrusion of Lucy Hinchliffe's insidious image, even though plausibly found wanting in the balance, was always vivid enough to constitute a stumbling-block in the path of the impulse that would have made for reconciliation. It always insinuated itself, but never lost by comparison. It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that he would have felt glad had it done so. At least, it would have been a relief. He did not at all relish his own half-heartedness, and sincerely wanted Cintra to be peerless in his eyes, as indeed she was till a fortnight since. He had a feeling like gratitude towards her for that flash of anger just now, which—the Critic of Beauty would have said—brought out her good points. She was helping him against himself.

If he had been wise he would have met her interruption by saying bluntly:—"You are jealous of Charley's *fiancée*, and I have given you no cause for jealousy." Whether exactly true or not, it would have dispersed the ambiguity of their talk. Instead of doing so he made the ambiguity permanent by saying.—"They are utterly groundless"—and sanctioned their adoption as a text of conversation, without getting an inch nearer to defining their nature.

"What are?" said Cintra, catching at the opportunity of throwing on her lover the responsibility for this dissension, which was an expression of suppressed feelings rather than a logical outcome of anything either had said. "What are you speaking of?"

"Your suspicions."

"When have I said I suspected anything?" Strictly speaking, she had not.

"You may not have actually *said* anything, Cintra. But you know what you *meant*."

"What did I mean?"

Fred evaded a direct answer. "What did you mean," said he, "by saying that nothing in the world would induce you to live under the same roof as Miss Hinchliffe?"

"What I said. Nothing in the world *would* induce me. But take The Cedars. Oh yes—take The Cedars by all means! Only—don't ask me to live there." She gave a strained unreal laugh. "But what would it matter? I should not be wanted. Yes—go to your Cedars and bask in the smiles of your Miss Lucy Hinchliffe!"

"Oh, Cintra!" Fred's honestly shocked tone of voice testified to the flagrancy of this bald statement of the *casus belli*. It was the first time it had found such a plain expression in language.

She seemed relieved, though, to have spoken it, and was more subdued in manner as she continued:—"I have said it badly. I knew I should. But it is what I mean."

The reserve of her speech carried far more weight than the petulance of its predecessor. Fred was alive to it, and his own manner changed as he said:—"What is it that you wish, Cintra? Tell me, what would you have?"

"I will tell you what I would have. I would have you say good-bye to me and go. Let us end the foolish mistake we have made, and be friends. No more than friends."

"But why?"

"Call it my wish for it, if you must put the blame on me. But let it end. Oh, Fred, let it end! Do not make me say more than I have said—more than I forced myself just now to say—about the cause."

The spell of the enchantress had died down steadily for a fortnight; and its flame, after a day spent with his old love under their old circumstances, was like a candle-flame with its liquid aliment up to its chin, all but extinct. All might have been well if Cintra's jealousy—too much on the alert throughout, the story thinks—had not rankled; had not been on the watch for its opportunity overmuch. Yet the story is aware that in saying this it is only reciting one of the lessons of convention. Who can say that what it is correct to call outbursts of jealousy are not—in young women, at least—gleams of insight into the instability of their lovers' hallucinations? How be sure that Cintra's seeming exaggeration of what might have been the merest trifling was not such an insight? A little premature, certainly!—but, after all, essentially sound? The story pauses to think.

Not so Mr. Frederic! He preferred to rank it as delusion, pure and simple, and possibly thought that the less he thought about it the better. "Say you are tired of me, Cintra," said he

irritably, "and I shall know what you mean. But for God's sake let's have an end of this wretched nonsense about Miss Hinchliffe. You *know* it is nonsense. You know I have hardly seen her."

"It does not matter how much or how little you have seen her. Or rather, the less you have seen her the worse—the worse for both of us! Have I no eyes, do you think? Oh no, Fred, it is useless—worse than useless—to talk about it. I *could* not be mistaken."

"You *are*, for all that! The whole thing is midsummer madness. There is not a particle of foundation of any sort . . ."

"Stop, Fred!" The young man made no attempt to finish. Was he just enough conscious of the weakness of his case to be glad to be stopped? Cintra continued:—"Will you make me a promise?"

"What is it?"

"To give up the idea of The Cedars."

"What! even for us alone?"

"You know that is nonsense. Look at the size. You know what I mean. Give up the plan."

Fred stuttered and hesitated. "It's not so easy as you think," he said. "Charley and I have talked such a lot about it, and I know he's looking forward to it so. It's awfully awkward. Just exactly the very day he is taking her to see the old place!" He then made a great mistake—that is, if he really wanted to conciliate the young lady. "Of course," said he, with a sense of relief in his voice, "Miss Hinchliffe may take a dislike to it, and that would make it all right."

"I see." Very coldly, this.

"How do you mean—*see*?"

"I understand." Quite as coldly, or even more so.

"Perhaps I *don't* understand."

"Perhaps not."

"Might we be a little less enigmatical?"

"What is it that you find so difficult to understand?"

"Well—the way you speak! What did I say wrong?"

There was real anger in Cintra's voice, which up to now had been showing signs of softening, as she flashed round on him. "Miss Hinchliffe," she began; and then again:—"Miss Hinchliffe—Miss Hinchliffe is to settle it. I am nothing! Oh no—I am to count for nothing. I am only Cintra Fraser!" She became subdued again in a moment. "Fred—what I said just

now was right. Let us part. Let this be the end of it. . . . I ask you to go."

Now, Fred had not intended his speech as an exaltation of Miss Lucy Hinchliffe's relative importance. The gist of it was merely that the adoption of the same view by both ladies would relieve the position, and make a solution easy. The Old Madhouse would lapse naturally; and the two couples, the wiser by their experience, would nest in different trees, if in the same coppice. So it vexed him to be represented as claiming a higher position for his friend's wife than his own. Also, it must be said that he was conscious enough of defect in his own demeanour as a lover to welcome an opportunity for a little justifiable indignation. He had felt great discomfort from being in the wrong, so far. Not that he admitted it.

"I shall go," he said, and put his hand on the door-handle.

The girl's breath seemed to catch, and she said with a half-gasp:—"Yes—and part friends. It must be this way. Fred—good-bye!"

How often at some moment when all hangs on our choice of onward or backward, right or wrong, black or white, we give way to that worst of all counsellors, a proper pride! Fred had one, unfortunately for him; and in addition was, just at this moment, landed on an outcrop of self-respect by the misinterpretation of his reference to Miss Hinchliffe's possible disapproval of the house. He was in the right there, and was anxious to forget a self-condemnation he could not help about his sensitiveness to Miss Lucy's black-eyed witchery. Pride had its way at a crisis, and instead of throwing himself on Cintra's mercy, and pleading readiness to confess any sin, anyhow, truly or falsely, rather than lose her, he actually took the hand of farewell she offered him, and left the room. Outside the door he had closed slowly, hoping that she would try and detain him, he paused and listened. A cry, a sob, any evidence of emotion, would have brought him back, penitent. But *her* pride was at hand, and equal to the occasion. Can it be certain that her resolution—obduracy, if you will—had in it no element of prudence and foresight on her own behalf? May she not have judged her lover's devotion to herself rightly, assessed it at its proper value?

Anyhow, no signal of distress within came to influence the young man without, who had no choice—consistent with self-respect aforesaid—but to go on to the street door and open it. He did so very audibly; not noisily, but with audible delibera-

tion, and listened. No sound! He closed it behind him and listened. Still, no sound! He went slowly down the long flight of stone steps; across the front garden, always slowly; paused long over his last chance—the clang of the garden gate—and then stood still listening in a sort of despair, not the least believing in any rescue now, before he walked away in the moonlight, emphasising his footsteps as a farewell chance. But it was all over.

And Cintra? She waited—waited immovable, with quick-coming breath and eyes still fixed on the door he had closed, waited till the garden gate had put its seal upon the deed of separation, and till she was sure those footsteps had taken him well out of hearing, and then gave way to a torrent of eager tears, that she had had ado to keep in check till now.

Papa Fraser, wandering downstairs in search of a parcel that ought to have come, found it on the hall-table and exclaimed against the vice of non-delivery of parcels immediately on their arrival. Had this one been in his possession an hour since, he would already have made up his mind what tone to take in reviewing the History of Chemical Nomenclature which it contained. He might even have had time to examine the chapter on the Alchemists. His wife, on the landing above, just going to retire for the night, said oh, dear!—she was always speaking to the servants on this very topic, and her efforts were fruitless. He must speak to Annette himself. Perhaps she would mind him. It appeared, however, that he had done so already, and had failed to impress Annette. His wife extenuated Annette, saying what could her husband expect of an uneducated girl whose father was a pork-butcher? The Professor said that nothing that he knew of in butchering of pork need prevent a conscientious daughter of one so employed from bringing a book to its reviewer. Annette herself appeared and excused herself on the ground that this was not a book, but a parcel, having come by parcels post. Not but what she was well aware of the contents, but a principle was involved. Of course—said she—if parcels with books inside was to count as books, she would know where she was, another time. Her mistress said she must mind she did, but what was she so late for? The force of the *but* was scarcely clear. Annette said she was waiting up for Miss Nancy, who hadn't come in.

"Not—come—in—yet!" The Professor brought his watch tempestuously from his pocket, exclaiming that it was just upon twelve o'clock, but was convicted of exaggeration, as it was only

just past eleven. The boy Eric, from some unknown overhead region, shouted out with incisive distinctness that Nance wasn't going to be home at any known hour, that everybody was to go to bed, that nobody was to fuss, and that admission to the house was to be achieved by the aiming of small pebbles at his window, if indeed he was not waked by Ajax the dog, who would hear Nancy's bell a mile off. So the family agreed not to fuss, though the Professor rather shook his head over the position.

But where were those two—*videlicet* lovers—who were insulated as much because they might become unbearable as for any other reason? Annette testified that she thought she had heard Mr. Carteret go half an hour back, and she supposed Miss Cintra was still in the little parlour. The Professor humphed, and thought it odd. "He never came upstairs to say good-night," said he.

"I have no control or influence of any sort," said the lady of the house. "But no doubt your daughter can explain." She took her candle and soared bedwards.

The Professor looked into the little parlour. "Sitting in the dark," said he. "What's become of the Patentee?" For Cintra had turned off the gas, and was sitting in the firelight, now a dull expiring glow.

"I am here," said she. "Mr. Carteret has gone."

"Mr. Carteret!" her father exclaimed. "Why, Cit!—what's that for?"

"It is all right," said she. "I did it." It was not so right though but that she fell suddenly into her father's arms and cried upon his bosom, as though her heart would break.

"Why, Cit—why, Cit—why, Cit, child! What is it all? Tut—tut—tut! . . . Pooh, girl!—just another bit of a quarrel, and a reconciliation! I know—lovers' quarrels—lovers' quarrels! None the worse for that!"

"This is not a lovers' quarrel—not what people call a lovers' quarrel. It is not a quarrel at all, perhaps; certainly not on my side." They were sitting on the sofa side by side now, he keeping her hand to pat—the hand Fred had held so short a time ago. It seemed an age already to her, and her hand hung listless, claiming no share in life.

"What is it then, if it is not a quarrel?"

"Only the end—the end of it all! I have done it. I have no quarrel with Fred. I daresay he is only like another man."

"You don't like to tell me what it is?"

"Yes, Papa, I will." She paused a moment as to collect

herself for an effort. "It is because I will not submit to . . . to what I know other girls are called jealous for . . . for making any complaint about. That is all—it is jealousy. Others can bear it. I cannot." She seemed to be analysing herself, without unfair bias. "I must have him all to myself, or not at all."

"I see. Master Fred has been making sheep's eyes at some other young lady. Well . . . well . . . well . . .!"

She was immediately anxious to exonerate him. Oh no—Fred was far too good for anything of *that* sort. He had *done* nothing. He would not *do* anything.

"Well—what's all the rumpus, then?" The Professor was quite honestly bewildered.

She only repeated:—"I must have him all to myself."

"Or not at all?" said her father. He mused, and got an insight. "I think I see what it is. Some other young lass has got into his head—like alcohol. They do. I know, because I was young myself once—before you were born, my dear." His voice saddened a little to say:—"Your dear mamma had a complaint against me once. She did the right thing though—she did the right thing."

"Ye-es?" Too close interrogation would scarcely have been daughterly.

"She took away the bottle. Perhaps I ought to put it, she took me away from the bottle. Either does. . . . Ah dear, dear!" He was reminiscent for a short moment, and then said, almost to himself:—"Saw the brute the other day! My word! . . . Well, it would be just the same with Fred, keep him away from the bottle! Alcohol's the worst, because in this case there's only one bottle. That's an advantage. Keep him away from the bottle."

"I know what you mean, Papa dear! But you put it so funnily. Only in this case it is impossible. Quite impossible." She flinched from a statement in full, though she foresaw it would have to be made in the end.

He did not press to know more. Indeed, he was satisfied that "it would be all right"; that there was no reality in the tragedy, and that the lovers would be billing and cooing again in twenty-four hours. Above all he was quite sure that he would do more harm than good by putting *his* oar in. So he merely counselled moderation, and temperance, and forgiveness, and all the things that would naturally be on the tongue's tip of a good little man; who, so far as he had a selfish motive in the matter, was gov-

erned only by a possibly too perfervid love of peace and quiet, and detestation of shindies. He was entirely wanting in the combative character of a true pacifist.

Cintra went away to a sleepless pillow, to watch and wait for the return of her sister, into whose ear she was longing to pour out the whole tale. She was sure of heartwhole sympathy in that quarter, for Nancy was always on the woman's side whenever a balance had to be struck between creditor and debitrix, or debtor and creditrix, as might be. But the hours passed and the clocks struck, and no Nancy came.

CHAPTER XIV

FRED'S first feeling of irritation against Cintra for what seemed an unreasonable and overstrained jealousy did not last him many minutes' walk from the garden gate. It gave way to two misgivings—one that she was not absolutely unreasonable; the other that she was in earnest. If she were—what then? The thought made him feel as much like a vacuum as was consistent with a belief in his existence—a belief that cannot be easily shaken. The future, or rather the futures, that he had been planning out so busily for himself and for her had vanished like the white ring of the magic lantern on the sheet, when all the slides are done and there are to be no more enchanting dream-worlds, and it is time for the children to go to bed. The air itself was gone in which his castles had been built; he had been roughly awakened from the sleep that his dream-worlds demanded, and he was a unit, without a purpose, on the cold bare earth! And worst of all—a thing he thought of now for the first time—he could never tell the source and origin of this collapse to Charley. How could he?

This was an awful thought. But it was simply an inevitable context of the position. There would be absolutely no choice for him but to put the whole miscarriage of his schemes and hopes on a cryptic dissension between himself and his love, of too intangible a nature to be understood of any people but themselves. That would always be practicable. But he must be on the alert to surround his entrenchments with barbed-wire entanglements, to keep Inquisitiveness at bay. Could he succeed, after so many years of unreserved mutual confidence with Charley Snaith?

A new terror shot across his mind. He knew that that young man and his *fiancée* had chosen this afternoon, that had just ended in an unwelcome midnight, for a visit to the Old Madhouse. What if the young lady took to the place with a passionate enthusiasm like that of Cintra that autumn day—Oh, how long ago, and how unlike it all was to now, that happy sanguine time!—when he and Cintra were wandering afar, on that most joyous of errands, the seeing of premises, and found the Old Madhouse as the result of an interview with that Wim-

bledon house-agent? What if she too had come under that fatal fascination of its decay—its white lichens on grey Portland, of the days when those quarries were sure they were inexhaustible—its matchless iron grill over the gate between two red-brick piers whose bulk alone deserved an article in *The Builder*, its panelled mahogany doors, its possibilities of History responding to Investigation? What, in short, if she had set her heart on the house as Cintra had done, and the whole arrangement had to be explained away, somehow or other? If, by good luck, she hated the place, the collapse of his own engagement would be but as that of any other couple's—an everyday affair. There would be no *nexus*, no mutual interdependence of arrangements. However, that was begging or borrowing a trouble.

He was very disinclined to go home, and equally averse to returning to his chambers; where, if he did not chance on Charley Snaith coming home late, he was tolerably sure to see him first thing in the morning. He would soonest break the news to him by letter, if possible. Then as to Maida Vale, it would at least be safer to be very late, to make sure of the departure of Elbows—this was how his mind traditionally spoke of Nancy—for after what he had heard of her lawless nocturnal escapades on her bicycle, he felt it was far from certain she would not stop the night with his mother, and depart in the early morning. Anyhow, he preferred that she should know that her sister's engagement was at an end from herself, not from him. So far as seeing his mother, and telling her, was concerned, he rather wished for it than otherwise. But then, had she not troubles enough, without helping him to bear his? Fred was not without his selfish side—for was he not a young man?—but he did not show it towards his mother.

He had another side of which the story has seen nothing, no chance having brought it into court—an active or athletic side. From boyhood upwards, in rowing, riding, swimming, walking—any exercise or athletic game—he had always borne a distinguished part among his fellows at school or college, and would have led easily had his physique been abnormally powerful. But in that respect he was only a little above the average. It was rather in muscular alacrity and a great endurance of fatigue that he shone. More especially, his walking and running, when sustained endurance was the end in view, had left fame for him both at his uncle's school and at Cambridge where indeed they had to make up for that fatal lack of concentration which had always stood in his light, and was the real cause of his 'aking

a very low place in Honours. The practice of walking prodigious distances had remained, while the classics had died away, leaving him some mathematics to forget at leisure, except in so far as they proved of service in Engineering. He would still occasionally, on no provocation, walk five-and-twenty miles in six hours, merely to stretch himself.

So, when he said to himself:—"I won't go home at all. I shall just walk over to Guildford and be back to breakfast at the Vale about nine o'clock," he meant exactly what he said. Maida Vale would stare, but what of that? He had symptoms upon him—mental-feverish symptoms—that called for a good long stretch to shake them off. It was his business to see they got it. Nothing like walking all night—all such a night as this—with the full moon swimming through the scattered cloud-rack overhead, and almost the certainty of a clear sunrise. He was angry, angry with Cintra, angry with himself. Perhaps more the latter; but he would not mope, that was flat! If Cintra was jealous about Lucy Hinchliffe, on the strength of the evidence, what would she not be jealous about? Cintra's husband, whether himself, or N or M, as might be, would have to take to his heels and run, whenever a tolerably pretty woman appeared on the horizon.

All the same, he said *peccavi* to himself, and admitted that no justifications might have had to be found for Cintra, if she had had all the evidence before her. But *he* knew he had kept it deep down in his very inmost heart. It was not as though he had confessed to those items of witchery which he now revised mentally, as from a Catalogue without Words; about which he stipulated that they were obvious facts which he could bear to look in the face, but could keep quite cool about, even while he enumerated them. Still, he asked himself, if Cintra had seen that Catalogue over his shoulder, how should she know how unmoved he was by this, or that,—wordless items of the lots on view? She would only have noted the beauty of this, the charm of that, the grace of t'other. She never could have gauged the depth of his critical indifference. . . . And so on, to talk himself into a good mood, to exonerate himself from a haunting self-blame, and to be magnanimous to Cintra. One ought always to be magnanimous to women, as one has been created stronger and wiser than they, however keenly alive one may be to the fact that another hasn't.

He formed a vague scheme in his mind of walking to Guildford—some five-and-twenty miles; say, six hours' walk. He

knew an inn there where they would get him a cup of coffee, as early as that, or earlier. Then he would catch an early train back, and be in time for his mother's breakfast, which was late. If Elbows *had* stopped the night, she would by that time have had breakfast to herself and departed, with an early farewell to her hostess. Then he could announce the change in his relations with Cintra, which he deliberately intended to optimise about; he would be by that time thoroughly able to see it in its right light, as really the best outcome of what was after all a mistake; and would go on, fortified by his mother's counsel, to what was really the much more difficult task of breaking the news to Charley Snaith.

That was his programme, and it lasted him as far as Ripley. Where it chanced that a party of bicyclists, on some expedition that ignored Time and Space, were resuming their journey at an unearthly hour in the morning, at the doors of a roadside inn, where in old days many a nocturnal coaching-party or horseman had rung up sleepy 'ostlers at hours equally unearthly. This inn had nearly died of the railways, with many others, when the sudden bicycle filled the country roads with a new and undreamed-of traffic. It was well known to Fred, and he was well known to the boy who had left his bed reluctantly to fasten up after the early departures. Of course they might have been left to let themselves out, like you might say, but they was good for a tanner among 'em, and these were not the days for pointing the finger of scorn at tanners, or indeed tizzies, if you come to that. The boy, interrogated about the available commissariat, could not provide a Lord Mayor's dinner at that time of night, but he could go as far as 'arf of mild and a cold sarsage. Fred did not seem tempted.

"You couldn't manage a cup of hot coffee, I suppose?" said he.

"Not without I 'oller up the missus," said the boy. "She's locked the cupboard and took the key to bed with her, she has. And her temper gets very short, times and again. . . . I tell you what I can do for yer though if you ain't in any blooming hurry. I can 'ot yer up a cup o' bovril over the gairce. There's a 'arf a tin left after these gents."

The last two or three of the bicyclists were just about to follow their companions. One of them, close at hand, joined in the conversation. "It's 'alas my poor brother!'" said he. "In the advertisements. It's not bad after you've got it down, don't you know! And it all depends on how you look at it.

It's very bad soup, but it's very good glue. . . . Hey, what's that?" This was in answer to a question from a companion, which Fred had heard imperfectly. "An old woman's? No!—an old man's . . . old gentleman's. . . . That's what they said. I don't know how they knew."

Fred, on the alert, asked:—"What was that? An old gentleman's what?"

"Only a body they found, as we came along. Some old chap committed suicide! *Felo de se*—that sort of game!"

"Stop half a moment. . . . Only to know where! . . . I have a reason for asking."

"All right! I shall catch 'em up, easy. They'd fished him out of a mill-pond. Somewhere."

"Yes—but *where*?"

"Hoy—Moses and Son!" He was calling to a companion, just departing, who halted and looked back. "Where did they say he was fished out?"

"Out of a pond just off the road."

"Yes—but *where*? Stupid!"

"How should I know? Pickles told me. He's gone on." Then this young man—evidently nicknamed "Moses and Son" from his race—shot round and was beside them in an instant. He had to rotate on a very short axis to keep his seat, but was always within hearing. "Pickles said 'Old woman,'" said he.

"Because he didn't know. A man with brooms to sell told me. But what, I, want, to, know, is,—where were we at the time? That's the point!"

"Oh—I s-s-see . . . ! Well—just about Wimbledon. This side of Wimbledon."

"Then why couldn't you say so?" But Moses and Son had no explanation to offer, and neither seemed to have any first-hand knowledge, except that last evening they had shot past a group of persons in the twilight, surrounding something which had just been placed on a stretcher. Their information was fragmentary, and indeed contradictory. But Fred had got his main point clearly established, and he was visibly agitated by it. So much so that Moses and Son said to the other young man *sotto voce*:—"Does the gentleman know any party who would be by way of committing suicide? You ask him, James!" But James seemed unable to frame the question, and they had to catch up with their comrades; so said good-night, and went off at fifteen miles an hour.

Fred changed his plan at once, and decided to go back. Per-

haps he was not in a good mood for cool reasoning, and that was why he weighed no evidence, but at once concluded that this drowned man would prove to be his uncle. He wondered, afterwards, why he jumped so readily at this conclusion, and on such vague information.

He had very nearly started to retrace his steps, when a voice stopped him—the Boy's. "Hoy!" it said, "you ain't a going to sarve me like that, after me a hotting of it up for yer, reg'lar prime, when I might just as well ha' been in bed." Fred remembered his covril, and went into the inn-parlour; where he found that the Boy, to make it as princely as circumstances permitted, had prepared it on a tray, with a table-napkin folded double to veil a spill of gravy. An exuberance of fancy had added a colossall decanter of cold water and a tumbler. Salt in a blue glass salt-cellar seemed more to the purpose, and Fred took a good deal with the wrong end of a pewter spoon, in the hope of abating thereby the gluefulness of the thick teacup's contents. Tasted with that spoon, as it was too hot for human lips to approach its base, it was eclipsed by the pewter, which was very unlike the wine of advertisements which leaves the palate immediately. He waited for the glue to cool, well knowing that this did not depend on caloric, or anything chemists have run home, but on the caprice of a particular coffee-cup. Never mind!—he could converse with the Boy. Where did he suppose those young men were going to?

"They don't know theirselves. Reg'lar on the loose, they are! They come in last evening. Greedy as you please, they was! Then they was all for going to bed early, and to be woke at three-thirty, and git on to a substantial breakfast at Guildford. Said it'd be plenty of time to talk over where they was a going after breakfast. Come from somewhere in Hesse, they did. Hout-of-the-way sort o' place. Next door to Roosher, as you might say."

Fred thought you mightn't, if you had accuracy at heart. But he said nothing, having his mind full of what he had just heard. "Did those chaps say anything in your hearing about a man drowned in a mill-pond, somewhere about Wimbledon?" This question, he thought, might get him some information he had missed in his short interview with the departed youths.

"I heard 'em mention some such a sort of game. I don't suppose they was expectin' me to take account of what they said."

"It waan't a secret." Fred was misinterpreting the Boy.

"Didn't say it worze. I was mentioning that we don't take much account of these here things, not in these parts. We lets 'em slide."

"What—suicides?"

"Ah—corpses and things! They don't trouble we. Nor yet anything else, that I know of. Missus she reads 'em in the noos-papers, now and again. But they don't trouble we."

Fred was impressed by this splendid indifference to the human lot. Was it an idiosyncrasy of the Portsmouth Road, or was it limited to halting places for bicyclists? "Couldn't you remember what they said?" said he. "Just to oblige—you know!" He was aware it would be a departure from a beaten path, but it would surely be an excursion into—suppose we say?—Samaria.

"I can tell most anything you like, as far as that goes, when it comes to obligin' a gentleman."

"Well, what did you hear them say about this drowned man that was fished up?" Fred felt he was speaking brutally; but then, he did not want the Boy to suspect motives.

"Just precisely that. He was a drowned man they fished up."

"And what sort of a man? What was he dressed like, did they say?" The Boy mused, and wanted prompting. Fred was getting impatient, and forgot Charley Snaith's frequent cautions about leading questions. "Was he dressed like a parson, for instance?"

The Boy picked up his spirits. "Right you are, Master!" said he. "Now I call to mind, that's the very selfsame thing one on 'em did say. Said he was a parson."

"And a big man—big and tall?" Fred felt so painfully certain now, that he did not scruple to make suggestions.

"Right you are again, Master! That's what they said. A rare big 'un. I heerd 'em a sayin' of it."

Fred was satisfied. He would go to Wimbledon anyhow, as that was the only tracing clue that he had. But he was keen now to come at the facts, and not disposed to spend time over walking, if there was any chance of an up-train at the nearest station. The Boy testified that he would catch the six-ten if he looked sharp, but it was a tidy walk to the station. He bolted the glue, and started, leaving the Boy to finish his night's rest, if so disposed. But the day had become an established fact, and the rosy dawn had gone away westward, and was well over the Atlantic by now.

Fred's brain was in a whirl, and no wonder, after such a day,

followed by such a night! His physical vigour was still many hours from a collapse; indeed, he was not looking forward to any rest till next night in bed. But his judgment had gone by the board. As he sped along the highroad toward the station acknowledging the truth of what the bicyclist had said, that the glue was not so bad when you had got it down, no doubt crossed his mind but that the mystery was solved, and the cause of his uncle's disappearance discovered. He would go to hear what he could of it at Wimbledon police station, and had no doubt he would be able to identify the body. He was consoled for the horror of his task by the reflection that but for this accidental hearing of the thing the news in all its gruesomeness might have come suddenly to his mother. He could save her from that.

He caught the up-train, and found himself at Wimbledon just as the clocks were striking seven. In a very short time he was interviewing the Inspector in charge, but was disappointed at his unsympathetic attitude. "Nothing of the sort reported so far. At least, not *here!*"—was his only comment. This was before he knew more than was to be learned from Fred's bald first enquiry about the drowned man, which did not show his identity. After he had entered the enquirer's name and address, he became more interested, saying:—"What was the name of the party again you mentioned?"—the party, of course, being the mortal coil someone had shuffled off in that mill-pond. Fred had not referred to his uncle by name, but did so now, with an effort towards illumination of the Inspector. "Not the subject of enquiry three weeks ago?" said he. He thought he had heard Fred's name before. But Fred might rest satisfied about the yield of that mill-pond. If that had been the Rev. Drury Carteret, they would have heard of it at that station by now. No fear on that score. But this Inspector threw doubt on the whole story of the mill-pond.

Nevertheless, Fred "elicited" from him that there was a mill-pond about two miles off, which had always been popular with suicides, and had had more than its fair share of attention from the victims of accidents. Nevertheless, that Inspector had a deep-seated conviction that it was, in this case, not guilty. "In course if you want a walk," said he, "there can't be any great harm come of your walking over to enquire. But I shouldn't, if I was in your place." Fred affected a general assent; but as soon as he was out of sight of that station, gave way to restless desire for certainty, and started for

Flinders's Mill, which he understood was the name of the water-mill in question. He did not want to arrive at Maida Vale, with this bad news, any earlier in the morning than was necessary. This would just fill out the time.

He found himself, rather to his discomfort, being directed into exactly the road the loquacious fly-driver had driven him and Charley Snaith along when they paid that visit to the Old Madhouse. If his directors to Flinders's Mill persisted in their testimonies as to its whereabouts, he might be unable to avoid it, as he told his inner self he wished to do. That self refused to accept his statement; and further accused him of an unaccountable desire to see the place again. Absurd as this seemed, he felt unable to pooh-pooh it with the thoroughness it deserved. However, he would only look at it outside, would certainly not go in.

He had arrived on the jerry-builder's desolation on the edge of which The Cedars still held to the traditions of past rusticity; now given over as "ripe for building" to what is known to house-agents as "development." He did not—could not—rejoice at the decision of Destiny to write nothing about it in the book of his future, but could he regret it? He answered this question, in the negative, as an elm fell by the roadside, to make way for the next lot of eligible residences. In a year or so The Cedars would be a piteous survival of a forgotten past, protesting in vain against the ghastliness of a residential present. If indeed anyone ever bought the remainder lease and prolonged its forlorn existence for a few short years, only to be "developed" in the end!

Those were his thoughts as he turned out of the main road into the lane which led past the gate of the disconsolate mansion. But they changed when he reached it, for in the freshness of the first really summer-like morning of the year it looked far from disconsolate. Fred saw through the grill of that coveted iron gate that the roses on the big bush half-way up the garden path would be bursting in a week or two, unless Fate caught them at it and changed the weather out of spite. He wondered which was which of the singing birds who, still in happy ignorance of the nightmare city, a year's march nearer since they had their last spring concert, were making their protected oasis vocal with their story of a hundred broods. Was that a chaffinch, for instance, that clear persistent note in a flood of trills and ripples? It was like his idea of a chaffinch—but what was the use of that? He was always wrong when he tried to guess songsters.

Did they, he speculated, sing better or worse for having no lunatics to sing to nowadays?

He stopped with his hand upon the bell-handle to invent, if possible, a sound reason for being at the house at all, and failed. He knew perfectly well that if ever man had taken action on a pure and unadulterated whim, he had done so when he turned off the main road in this vague purposeless way. He clinched the matter by a good round pull, which set the bell within—which lived under a decaying cover in the open air—swinging and jangling in a way that almost convinced him he had a purpose. He had none, and had to devise an obligation, with any caretaker in the wide world. Mrs.—what was her name?—Grewbeer, in consideration of an inordinate tip, was bound to wink at any fiction he chose to justify his conduct by. If she chose to say:—"Don't you tell me no lies!" he would be justified in reducing her shilling to sixpence. This ethical speculation, however, engrossed him less than the question why on earth, seeing that he and this domicile had surely parted company for good, he should suffer from this involuntary persistency to see the inside of it again.

Mrs. Grewbeer in the flesh—or the skin and bone rather—appeared at the end of the gravel pathway, but grugged locomotion, seeming to disbelieve in the *bona fides* of the summons. Fred heard her commune with one within, whose words must have been angry, judged by his voice. "It's them boys again," said she. "I ain't goin' to traipse all the way to the gate, not on *their* account." She, however, moved a little further down the path, and called out:—"Who's that rang?"

"Me!" shouted Fred. The question had been to determine whether the ringer had fled, and was watching from behind somewhere to witness her discomfiture, or otherwise. So Fred thought a monosyllable met the case. Indeed, how could he have described himself?

The old woman came to the gate, and recognised him as "the gentleman." She said, for courtesy:—"If you'd ha' said it was you, I'd have 'urried a bit more." But could Fred have called out:—"I'm the gentleman"?

He produced his prearranged fiction, with nonchalance. He had got a dimension wrong by accident, and couldn't get his plans right. He enlarged upon it, to convince himself of its validity. "It's only a few inches out," he said, "but there's nothing like having a thing right, while you're about it."

Mrs. Grewbeer applauded this, as a maxim or principle that

guided the lives of Grewbeer, his Uncle Mark, and her own family connection. But fancy the gentleman coming all the way from town for only a few inches! And the other gentleman could have took a little measure like that, only yesterday, when he come with the young lady. She seemed to think that the unprofessional mind could grapple with small measurements—the smaller the easier. Micrometry thinks otherwise.

"Did the other gentleman come yesterday?" Fred, with aroused interest, shouted the question in her ear.

"Oh—ay! Sure enough! In a carriage they come. Him and a young lady."

"And were they—was *she* pleased with the house?" Fred asked with some anxiety.

"Oh—ay! I shouldn't say she took it to 'art much." What did that mean? It was enigmatical.

"Didn't care about it?" Fred affected insouciance, but listened carefully for an answer.

"The lady?"

"Yes—the lady. . . . Damned old slowcoach?" This was aside, of course.

"The lady . . . only it ain't for me to say . . ."

"Go ahead!"

"The lady she was what the folks they do call hairy, down in these parts. Gives herself hairs."

Fred had to reflect a moment to find the meaning of this. Then he saw that he had been momentarily deceived by an aspirate—a too too solid one. In other quarters of the world, no doubt, folks would have avoided the association of a Persian Cat by the use of some such expression as *airisome*. This was so far satisfactory though, that it showed that the young lady's approval had not been rapturous. "What was it she said now?" he asked in a confidential shout—or the nearest reasonable approach to it.

"I didn't ketch much she said, but I took notice, with my heyesight. The apartments was too small or too large, and mostly looked the wrong way."

"That's all right, anyhow!" Fred spoke to himself, in a tone of relief. "Anything else?"

"There was too many heckers when a door slammed. And she reg'lar took against our senk. I see her smellin' and a thinkin'—a smellin' and a thinkin'—and I says was she noticin' anything? Because they was a rare lot worse, I says, and the senk was a patent, and the trappin' might want a bit of seein'

to, but nothin' un'olesome by the flaviour. And Grewbeer he giv' assurance, being practical hisself. But there!—she put me past, the hairs she gave herself. What I cannot abide, is notice-takin'; and so I said to Grewbeer the minute I seen the last of her. A pryin' and sniffin', indeed!"

All this was most gratifying to Fred, and he really felt quite indebted to that senk, or sink, whose flavour had produced so strong an effect on Miss Hinchliffe. It was a weight off his mind to hear that the beauty took an unfavourable view of the residence. He would be much better able to tell Snaith of his own disastrous climax.

But he was bound in honour—to keep on speaking terms with Probability, as it were—to carry through his little farce of measuring something. It should be the width of that long passage going to the greenhouse. If he wavered about where it was, his fiction would be shaken. Self-respect demanded persistency, and he measured it carefully twice with his little ivory foot-rule, and made a note of it on his shirt-cuff. "Three-and-a-quarter inches out!" said he. "I thought so." He did it solely to deceive himself; certainly not for the benefit of Mrs. Grewbeer. And as for Mr. Grewbeer, Fred surmised that he was still in bed.

There was no substratum of sense or purpose in any of this performance. He did not suspect himself of being light-headed or irresponsible. Yet, in a sense, he probably was so. He kept on telling himself, at odd moments, that the termination of his relation with Cintra was to make no difference to him. It was, he decided, not to be a disappointment—only an awakening; only the end of a mistake. He had some misgiving now as to how he should meet his mother's sympathy—pray Heaven she would not be sympathetic! Charley might sympathise if he liked. It would be a reasonable weakness in Charley, seeing what *his* position would be if Lucy Hinchliffe . . .

He stopped himself with a jerk, and felt ashamed. The story suspects that he saw himself now for the first time; all the shallowness of his love for Cintra, which had allowed—he could not deny it now—that the pulses of his heart should be abnormally stirred by what self-speech elected to call mere beauty, and that beauty already dedicated to his f . . . !! That love had been illusion all along, and Cintra had found it out in time! Fortunate for her that she had done so; fortunate for him. But stop! How if her love for him had been of another sort? He could recognise the instability of his own passion for her,

and could—magnanimously—despise himself for it. But how about the nature of *her* affection for *him*? Had he ever given it a thought?

He shook himself free of any responsibility to his conscience on that score, considering that the decision of the question rested with Cintra, not with him; and that it was at her desire, not his, that their relation was terminated. He would nevertheless have felt more respect for himself had the draught been more bitter to swallow.

The most he could do, as he stood there in the dwelling they had schemed to make their home, was to heave a fairly heartfelt sigh over the uncertainty of our lot on this planet. But, on the way from the bottom of his soul, it got mixed with one of relief that sundry embarrassments incidental to the proposed sharing of the one nest by the two pair of love-birds would be avoided.

In that avenue of thought he was caught in another trap of self-reproach. His reflection that Uncle Drury, after all, probably would have vetoed the whole scheme, made him angry with himself for allowing his own troubles and perplexities, even for a moment, to obscure the darker cloud of the mystery of his uncle's disappearance. Here too on the very spot where he was last seen alive!

Was he getting a little light-headed? He *did* suspect himself of it a moment later; for nothing else could account for an odd incident that happened at this moment, and caused him some uneasiness about his own condition.

Mrs. Grewbeer had withdrawn impressed by a belief that a cat had got in and 'id, and the trouble they giv' was beyond language to describe. She was hunting for that cat in a remote apartment when Fred put away his pencil. He turned and walked after her, not because he could not let himself out, as his uncle had done; but because, unlike him, he had not paid his footing in advance. At the angle of the passage a vivid image of his uncle, as described by Mrs. Grewbeer, when she left him to answer the bell, had power to stop him for the time that it lasted. And it was then that the voice which on his former visit he had ascribed to his friend—because it could not have been anyone else's—said again, in precisely the same drill-sergeant tone:—"Come back, Fred!"

He was alarmed, almost seriously. But his alarm was about his own state—a scare free from superstition. He remembered how Charley—jokingly, to be sure—had accused him of being "dotty," and had ascribed his dottiness to the atmosphere of

lunacy which still hung over the Old Madhouse. That was a Scientific Possibility, as we now knew. Had we not ascertained, beyond a shadow of doubt, that there were microbes too small for detection by the most powerful microscopes? It had become scientifically certain that things existed that could never be perceived by us. No superstitious nonsense—spirits and ghosts—but real Scientific things! Among these, why not the bacillus of Lunacy? Anyhow, after that, the sooner he was on his way to Flinders's Mill, the better!

A sound as of an old person terrifying a cat with whoops, a scud and a rush, and then the reappearance of Mrs. Grewbeer on the main staircase. Her first words reassured Fred about the state of his own faculties. "Who 'ollered?" said she. "Somebody 'ollered!"

It occurred to Fred that he would be more likely to have the good lady's report in full if he affected to have heard nothing. So he replied:—"Couldn't say! Who hollered where?"

The old woman's bony finger pointed. "Jist round where you was, a medjerin!" said she.

"Outside in the street," said Fred. "Must have been! There *was* nobody my way, to holler." He preferred falling back on a *a priori* certainty to giving personal testimony. Besides, his object was to elicit personal testimony, and nothing does this so well as an affirmation of impossibility.

"Warn't nobody, good Lord! Then what should I hear him 'oller for? He took care to be there, afore ever he 'ollered. You may take that off o' me, for all I'm nigh on ninety." She evidently *had* heard the voice. But when he asked what the words were, she demurred. "One don't ketch one word agin' another, at my time o' life," she said. "He didn't 'oller for to say nothing. You may put your money on that, young Master!"

It was evidently useless to press for details. She had heard that someone shouted something, but could not say what. Fred resented her having heard anything, as it presented an obstacle to a theory of hallucination, which his nervous condition and want of sleep would have made plausible. It was more with the idea of rounding off the subject than that he expected intelligent information that he asked the old woman the whereabouts of Flinders's Mill.

"Hay?" said she. "Ho!—Flinders's Mill. No—not Flinders's Mill I don't know. Are ye sure it wasn't Draycroft's!" But Fred was as certain as of anything in an uncertain world that it was Flinders's, and by no means Draycroft's.

Would it be possible that Mr. Grewbeer would know of it? "He don't know, if I don't," said his wife. "And no wonder!—seein' I've known these parts seventy-two years, ever since I married my first, and Grewbeer's not been here above forty years yet. But there ain't no law that I know of against asking him."

In the absence of any statute, Fred decided on making the enquiry. Mr. Grewbeer was out of bed, if you like. This was Mrs. Grewbeer's way of intimating that he had not arrived at the point of putting off his nightshirt. He was, in fact, when Fred looked in at his door by permission, in a flannel gown. So his wife said, adding her advice that he should git his trousers on, and not set there thinking, like a howl. There was no ground whatever for concluding that he was employed in thought, except that he was not employed in action.

When asked for the whereabouts of this mill, he repeated its name several times with a stress on the first syllable, as though he did know of a mill spelt nearly like that, but not quite. "Flinderses—Flinderses—*Flinderses*!" said he. Then a light dawned suddenly, and he addressed his wife:—"Why, that self-same mill I was a tellin' you of last night was Flinderses, where the party was took out dead. Only last night! So there's the mill safe enough, and there you'll find it. You keep right along the road till you git to The Three Magpies. And don't you stop there, but foller right on till you get acrost the bridge."

Mr. Grewbeer waited so long for his hearer's imagination to cross the bridge, that the latter said impatiently:—"Yes, yea—and then? Then do what?"

"I'm a tellin' of yer!" said Mr. Grewbeer, not to be hurried. "You keep to your right, where you see the towin path, and keep along betwixt and between the canal on your right and the overflow on your left, and you'll come to the backwater where the party was took out dead."

"Good God!" Fred was unable to restrain an expression of emotion. But he would have done so if he could, for he did not court the confidence of these two old people.

"You ain't keerful what you say, Grewbeer. Supposin' the gentleman's acquainted!"

"What was I a sayin' of? The gentleman he up and asks me, 'Where do you make out Flinderses Mill is?' And ain't I a tellin' of him? You be keerful what you say yourself, afore takin' other folk up short." The old man was very irritable, and, Fred thought, unreasonably.

So he took on himself to make peace. "You mustn't blow

your wife up on my account, Mr. Grewbeer," he said. "You see it is possible . . . I have some reason to believe, that is—that this man that was found in the water yesterday was . . . was in short a relation of my own. . . ." He hesitated, as he was far from clear that old Grewbeer knew, or at least was alive to, the facts of his uncle's disappearance, and that he had been last seen at The Cedars.

"Well, young Master, you go down to The Three Magpies and enquire, and if you don't find your relation there, it'll be because he's gone home. Ah—on his legs! You may stare, but he was getting all to rights, said the doctor when I come away, maybe eleven of the clock."

Fred fairly gasped. "Why, man, what the . . . what the . . . devil do you mean? 'Getting all to rights' after . . . after . . ." He could not finish:—"After being nearly a month in the water." The clash of his firm conviction that this *must* be his uncle, with this first-hand evidence of the incident, now heard for the first time, was overpowering. He could only find hoarse utterance for:—"Impossible!—impossible! What does it mean?"

The old man caught half his meaning, and ascribed to him unfamiliarity with the powers of resuscitation after drowning. "Arter three-quarters of an hour in the water? *That* ain't nothing uncommon. I've known a man five hours under, and the doctor he fetched him round. If this here chap had knowed how to swim, he'd have got hisself out easy. As it was they had to go for the dredge—'angs near the ash-tree 'cos of frequent accidents—and a party misdirected of 'em." Strange to say, this statement, that the man who fell in could not swim, did what nothing else in the case as presented had been able to do; namely, showed Fred what an utterly false hare had been started by that incoherent young bicyclist at the inn at Ripley. Fancy his Uncle Dru, famed for his swimming in school and college records, unable to get himself out of a mill-pond!

Then he asked the question that he should of course have asked old Grewbeer at first. "What was the name of this man wh fell in the water?" The reply threw a light on one corner of the misunderstanding. "He was the Rev. Soomat-or-other. Name of Sewell—or Grooby—some such a name! Couldn't say."

Fred left the enlightenment of the old man, as to the motives of his enquiry, to chance, or to his wife, as might be, and said what he believed to be a final farewell to The Cedars. The

place had been the *motif* of so much air-castle building in the past that he had now the task of forgetting, that his farewell was not without a mixed feeling hard of definition. Was it regret? He denied it. Still, it wasn't exactly rejoicing.

He was at least sure of one satisfaction, that it *was* farewell.

Such self-reproach as it stimulated might be a thing of the past. He would not have felt so sure of this if Mrs. Grewbeer had reported a rapturous attitude of the young lady visitor of yesterday. Keen regret on her part at the collapse of the scheme would have embarrassed the revelation of his own position to his friend, the prospect of which was already a discomfort to him.

What was *not* a satisfaction was that recurrence of the illusion of the voice calling out to him to "come back," as it had done before. And yet—why illusion?—when the old woman heard a shout at the same moment? That must be his consolation. Because no one ever hears or sees another person's hallucination. *Therefore*—this is real reasoning, you know—what Mrs. Grewbeer heard could be none of his fancying. That was all he cared about—to be kept in temper; let him not be mad, sweet Heaven! He had not quite King Lear's excuses for delirium, but he was beginning to feel that his past twelve hours were so much playing fast and loose with sanity.

The world was swimming about a good deal when he got to Waterloo, having been lucky again with an up-train from Wimbledon, and he felt very unsure what he was going to do next. Go to Maida Vale in a hansom? Of course! But what a plight to present himself to his mother in! He caught sight of himself in a sheet of plate-glass with solid darkness behind it, and wondered who that wasted, haggard chap was. For he was not feeling much the worse physically. Yet all his powers of affecting equanimity must be at their best when he came to the telling his mother of the trick Fate had played her; conjuring away a daughter-in-law, without a hint of a substitute! Besides, would he not be late for breakfast—even for her late breakfast? He looked at his watch; it had stopped of course, never having been wound up. But there was the station clock, and it was nearing half-past ten. Obviously, a case for a wash-up, boots cleaned by machinery, and breakfast at the refreshment room, however much the young ladies at the buffet seemed to prefer the other customers. Fred thought to himself how odd it was that everyone has the same experience. A contradiction in terms!

He relented to his breakfast, consumed it, and felt better. He

might have let himself go to sleep—but no, that was not safe! Sleep must not be risked till after lunch. Who could tell how he would feel after oblivion? Most of us have had the experience of knowing that troubles and perturbations are best dealt with on the nail—by our first self, as it were. One goes to sleep all resolve and readiness for action; one wakes a dejected victim of moral cowardice and physical irresolution—the understudy of our first-self, who always falls through when called on.

Besides—get it over! That was the thing that had to be done.
“Hansom!”

CHAPTER XV

"It's perfectly ridiculous in me lying here," said Nancy. "Simple self-indulgence!" But she didn't attempt to raise her head from her pillow.

"You will lie still till Dr. Culpepper has seen you, at any rate. If he lets you get up—well, he'll be responsible!" Thus Mrs. Carteret; not uneasy now about the ultimate outcome of this accident, and not the least fidgety about the non-appearance of Fred, which she ascribed partly to his prejudice against this dear girl, who after all will be his sister-in-law. Of course he went back to his chambers; and will most likely turn up to lunch, in a couple of hours.

"Isn't the other man's word sufficient—the young man's?"

"Mr. Harrison's? Quite sufficient to satisfy me that you'll be all right in a day or two. He says he'll answer for your spine, now."

"I consider that's taking a great liberty."

"I'm very much obliged to him for taking it. Especially as he says you are Dr. Culpepper's case, and he has nothing to do with you. We shall see what Dr. Culpepper has to say."

The case murmurs something to the effect that Dr. Culpepper is only an old fogey, and changes the subject. "Eric must be back by now?" she says, half as a question.

"Oh dear yes! He's been gone quite two hours."

"And he was sure the machine was all right?"

"Quite sure. All but a spoke of the hind-wheel a little jammed."

"I'm glad, because of riding it back. . . . What!—not ride it back? You'll see I shall be all right after lunch."

"I shall see."

"Well—you *will*!"

"Very well. I shall." This conversation—during which it is noticeable that the patient, who is making such bold schemes, keeps her head remarkably quiet on the pillow, and speaks cautiously—arises from the reference to Nancy's brother Eric, who had appeared on his bike at eight o'clock in the morning, to find out about his sister. He, of course in ignorance of what he should hear, and only knowing that she had not come home,

had prefaced his enquiry with a statement that he knew it was awful rot to get in a blue funk about people who didn't come home, because they always turned up all right in the end, and you looked like a Lot of Asses. Nevertheless he, himself unmoved, had consented to run over and ascertain the facts, to soothe the nervous terrors of "his people"; especially his governor, who was noted for unreasonable fits of panic under such circumstances. The exact expression he used was that the aforesaid governor was a "one-er at getting in a stew," especially about the girls; but that his own calmer judgment had held this stew to be great rot. He seemed, however, relieved from some feeling inconsistent with absolute stoicism when he found his sister able to talk, with no fractured limbs, and a guaranteed spine. For Dr. Harrison had only just ended a flying visit of enquiry.

"What was that he said about Cit and Fred having had words?" Nancy says this, as a corollary to Eric.

Mrs. Carteret can remember, but she doesn't seem to attach weight to it. "He described it as a *shine*, I think. But he added a note of explanation. It wasn't exactly a scrap, but you might call it a scrum, if you liked. I had no guide to a choice of language. Probably it's nothing. That's their way!"

"How I do enjoy boys!" says Nancy. "But they spoil at sixteen. I hope 'Ric will last another twelvemonth."

What a blessing it is that one can neither see nor hear what goes on at a distance! Only then, to be sure, one has to hear of it after!

Dr. Culpepper came, and made himself very unpopular with Nancy. For he treated her intention to ride back to Gipsy Hill after lunch as suicidal, if practicable; though probably quite out of the question. Still, while she condemned the doctor as an old mollycoddle, she began to be afraid she might presently suspect him of having a certain amount of conventional reason on his side. Otherwise, why hold so fast to that pillow?

He was very apologetic, was Dr. Culpepper, for sending such a collapsible nurse. It was just as well, on the whole, that she wasn't particularly wanted. But what could you do? There was no hard and fast line of possibility, in resisting that insidious enemy, Sleep. The only rule was to go on till they broke down, and blow them up next day. Nancy "pointed out" that if there was no nurse she wouldn't break down. The doctor assented, but would not admit that this expedient was practicable in all cases. All he could say was that this one had seemed as

brisk as a bee at the Home. "How brisk is a bee?" said Mrs. Carteret, with misgivings about Insect Life, as known to proverbs.

Dr. Culpepper was quite clear about one thing—that the more the patient slept the better. If she could sleep for a week, she would probably be ready for another bicycle accident at the end of it. Mrs. Carteret said:—"Suppose, dear, you take the doctor's very broad hint, and go to sleep. I shall go out and get a little air before Master Fred comes. See!—I'll put the hand-bell here and tell Lipscombe to run the minute she hears it." Nothing could be said against this, and she and the doctor left the house together. He rode off in his brougham, and she walked towards Regent's Park, countenanced by the dachshund. His attitude towards her was that of a guardian who could not give her his whole attention, having many discriminations to make in the gutters and on posts and basements. When whistled for, he always completed the matter in hand before giving attention to the summons. His figure—if that term can be applied to him—lent itself to deliberation.

She was glad to be alone for awhile. She could not think over old times among new associations, and her mind had been wrenched back into the old time by those few odd words of a feverish girl; spoken in sleep too! Why should these incoherent words set her thoughts on the alert to rake up forgotten events that might throw a light on that early story of her husband's brother? That was what they did.

Possibly it was because the words were sufficient to show the nature of the false surmise that had produced them. It was not an unnatural one, after all, to be indulged in by a romantic Nancy. She could look it in the face without wincing, *because* of the very absurdity of it. What *was* it, after all, that had presented itself to the child's mind as a possibility? That her husband's elder brother had set his heart on her; had never declared his passion; and had suppressed it when he found the way things had gone. That was the only meaning she could devise for:—"She was the girl herself." Not so very far-fetched, when all was said! Where would the absurdity have been, indeed, had she been even nearing womanhood when Dru first set eyes on her?

The obvious basis of Nancy's whole flight of fancy was that speech she herself had repeated to her of her mother's that it was *impossible* that he should wed now with this widow-lady, who would have filled out Fred's theory of the cause of the dis-

appearance of his uncle. What obstacle was there, of a legal sort, to any marriage, except consanguinity? And what consanguinities were there open to discussion as rendering marriage impossible, except the two factitious ones? It was a perfectly natural mistake for Nancy to fall into, as she might easily conjure up a completely false image of another family's relations thirty-odd years ago. *She* certainly was *not* "the girl herself!" She could, and did, smile at the idea.

But absurd as the idea was in itself, it had power to infect her mind with an almost morbid tendency to reminiscence. No one survived now to tell her the story of that early love of her brother-in-law which had jarred on his life and thrown its machinery out of gear. All who could possibly have had any knowledge of it had passed away; from *her* world, at any rate. Nothing was now left for her but speculation, and this dear Nancy girl's preposterous dream was responsible for it.

She asked herself, did she really remember the very first occasion when she saw Dru? Ye-es—she was pretty sure of it! And one thing was certain—that on that day he cannot have been an unrequited lover, unless indeed that class has exceptional powers of dissimulation. For on that day she remembered him as the nucleus of a sort of bundle of small girls and boys—it was at a children's party—whom he was carrying on his shoulders, while their friends noisily demanded to be taken too, contrary to all physical possibility. She could recollect at this length of time—thirty-eight years!—his big voice from under the legs of a midget who was holding on by his hair:—"Now then, children! Add yourselves together! See how old you are, all added up!" And then afterwards, when the creatures had been disentangled from him with shrieks of laughter, his comment on the achievement to two Oxford youths whom he had in charge. "You tell them *that* at Brasenose, boys,—that you saw your respectable coach, the Rev. Drury Carteret, run round the garden with forty-two years of baby on his shoulders." That was *not* the voice of a saddened and disappointed man that she could recall so clearly. Nor was the face that turned to hers afterwards the face of one. What was it he said? "You're the kid that wouldn't come, aren't you? Why—how old are *you*?" She remembered saying she was nearly ten, and *much* too old to carry; also, that she felt she was telling stories, being only just over nine.

That fixed the time. How long could she remember him after that, without any observation on her part of material change,—

of such depression as *must* have resulted from so severe a disappointment? She could not follow the years that came after; she could only remember the general order of things. The colossal young parson who came at intervals to visit his parents next door was the Rev. Mr. Carteret. Fred, her particular friend, was his little brother, fourteen years his junior; her husband had been one of those singular late arrivals turning up for enrollment a good five years after recruiting was supposed to have ceased for good. She and he carried on a long correspondence at that period, of which a peculiar feature was that the sealed letters were handed from one to the other over the wall, not sent by post. She had them all, carefully tied up with a blue ribbon, among her treasures from the past. She had re-read them all, more than once, since her husband's death; and had been amused, in a sort of smileless way, at the frequent references to a Secret Society which flourished in those days, whose objects—secrecy apart—were undefined. Even that *raison-d'être* seemed likely to disappear, when the Prospectus was issued; for one was proposed, and was the subject of controversy about Style. She could remember an animated discussion as to whether Fred's big brother "should be told," or should be kept in darkness. She herself was in favour of admitting him to the knowledge of this Society's existence—the only disclosure it ever had to make!—when he came up from Oxford to stay.

But the image of him in her mind during those unsuspecting years of infancy was the image of a person who was a matter-of-course. All of us can remember in our early experience many such grown-ups in the family and out of it, and the story is convinced that no better description of them can be given. Are we fully aware—we oldsters—that we are regarded by youngsters as matters-of-course?—that is to say, as persons who *must* be, or there would be no grown-up people; but who never were properly *young*, by hypothesis?

She felt certain, although "Fred's big brother" was an indeterminate item of maturity of this sort in those three or four years that were neither childhood nor womanhood—those years in which she and Fred had found each other out, but she at least did not suspect the meaning of the discovery—that if any shadow fell upon the young clergyman's life at that time it made no change in him by which any bystander would have guessed it. Rather, her memories of him—hazy as they were—all went in the other direction. If the hopelessness of this attachment,

which he had confided later to her mother, was brought home to him during that period, it must have been during one of his long absences as tutor in charge of reading parties of young undergraduates. This would have given him time to shake off visible depression and make an effort towards concealment. But, making every allowance for every possibility, she could not understand a disappointment—such a one as her mother's tale pointed at—passing over a young man's life without causing visible change, or exciting the suspicion of any of his own family. For her mother had certainly seemed to imply that she herself was the sole *confidante* of this story. Indeed, she was almost certain that she made use of the expression:—"He never told anybody else."

Her thoughts travelled on to the time that followed—the long period of her own engagement; long because of the youth of the parties. There, Memory was on the alert, bringing from her stores any quantity of raptures and despairs, fears and hopes; precious moments easily forgotten then, with such a future to forget it; tearfully remembered now, with such a present to look back from! But they were of little service to her at this moment, when what she wanted was to remember something of the youth of the brother she had lost so strangely.

She was not to be allowed to continue on these lines of reflection undisturbed. For Mr. Bagster Sutcliffe, the husband and father of her visitors of yesterday, crossed her path; or, rather, met her upon it, going in the same direction. He was an editor, and his newspaper didn't seem to want editing on Monday, till near eleven o'clock at least. The advertisement manager was at work, no doubt, and that was half the battle. For nine-tenths of the battalions were advertisement, and if the human race is really the better for voluminous misstatements of the merits of goods for sale, the *Central Sun* was one of its benefactors. This editor lived at St. George's Terrace, Primrose Hill; and liked walking to his work when it was fine, for exercise. But he seemed surprised to overtake this lady and her dachshund. "Wasn't aware you took an early walk, Mrs. Carteret," said he.

"I frequently do, in fine weather," she replied. "But I wasn't able to do so to-day. However, I have had the advantage of meeting you, Mr. Sutcliffe."

The gentleman would have liked to hit back, but didn't see his way; repartee was not his line. He probably was referring to this interview when he said, later in the day, that some women were dam sharp; but best out of politics—best out of politics!

He changed the subject. By-the-bye, he said, he had been made quite uneasy that morning by a paragraph in the newspaper, but his wife had been able to assure him it was not the same Carterets. . . . He was pulled up short by an expression on his hearer's face.

"It is the same Carterets," said she. "You mean the paragraph about the disappearance of the Rev. Dr. Carteret. He is my brother-in-law." She knew she would have to face a great deal of this sort of thing. Was she bound to do more than declare the facts, drily? What a relief it would be to make for any solitude, to be out of sight and hearing of her tiresome species!

This gentleman seemed an undeserved example of its tiresomeness. He appeared suddenly paralysed with horror, while at the same moment he experienced a paroxysm of decision. "You don't say that, Madam!" he exclaimed, gasping and glaring. "Why—good Goard! Something ought to be *done*!"

"Quite so!" said Mrs. Carteret, quietly. "The only question is—what? My son and I have every reason to be satisfied with the energy and intelligence that the police are showing." She said this rather perfunctorily. Had they? Did she not mean that she and Fred had been unable to do anything themselves?

The editor nodded sagaciously a great many times. "You do right, Mrs. Carteret," said he, "to rely upon the efficiency of the police force—especially the Detective Department in Scotland Yard." He brought his forefinger into action to emphasise this, much as though it had been a good typical example of an Inspector. "Rely upon it—you may take my word for this—that if there is anything that *can* be done, the police will do it."

As Mrs. Carteret had already expressed all faith—short of Fetichism—in the powers of the Force, she merely said:—"I am sure they will," rather tepidly. For that undredged pond had occurred to her. She added suggestively that she must not detain Mr. Sutcliffe, and she had to get home herself.

"Yes!" he said, with decision. "I must be getting on. I am late. . . . My wife will be most concerned to learn her mistake—that it is not, as she supposed, *not* the same Carterets. Most concerned!" His victim thought he would go now; but he didn't. He got a new lease. "A . . . you must allow me . . . just one word! My wife and the girls were so *delighted* with the charming visit they paid you yesterday. They have been *able to talk of nothing else ever since*. Good-bye—good-bye—good-bye! I must hurry."

Mrs. Carteret shook hands with this gentleman without expressing a hope she felt that this phase of his family's life would pass, and a change become possible in their conversation. Liebig took upon himself to see him to town, and had to be whistled for. He stood half-way between the whistler and his new acquaintance, looking from one to the other; but finally decided that the former had a prior claim, and came back without undignified haste. Mrs. Carteret started for home, without picking up the lost thread in her musings. Now that her son was so very much overdue, she felt there might be another uneasiness in store for her. Suppose he too . . . ! However, surely that was a trouble she need neither beg nor borrow.

She was soon at ease on that score. For as she turned the corner of Hall Place, sure enough there was Fred, waiting at the garden gate of her house. He saw her and came to meet her. Liebig started also to meet him, with the alacrity of a bolster.

It was she who spoke first. But she only said:—"Why—Fred!"

He said:—"Yes—anything the matter?"

She answered:—"Plenty's the matter. But it wasn't that. It was that you looked so."

"How do I look?" He had arrived some minutes ago, and had heard the news of the accident from Lipscombe. He followed his mother straight into the house, the street door having been left standing open during the short time he had awaited her outside. He glanced at his image in the mirror over the chimney-piece, and reported on himself. "I'm all right enough," he said. "What is it that's the matter? The 'plenty,' I mean?"

"That poor darling girl. She was as nearly killed . . . But Lipscombe told you, I suppose?"

"Lipscombe told me something."

"Well—she had the narrowest escape. She hadn't gone above half a mile—not so much—when . . ."

"Lipscombe told me. But she said the doctor had seen her and she would soon be all right. She's welcome to the room. I needn't see her, I suppose?"

"You needn't see her!" Mrs. Carteret repeated her son's words in a puzzled tone of voice. It meant:—"I cannot see why the question should be asked;" not:—"Why should you?"

"I mean, of course, when she's up," said Fred, uneasily. "But I must get on to town as soon as possible."

Now, this speech contained a nicety in language. The expression "get on to town" implied, temperately but decisively, that Fred had spent the night elsewhere; had in fact come up from the country. His mother saw this at once. "Why, where have you been?" said she. "Did you stop at Norwood?"

"Oh no. No, I didn't stop at Norwood." He spoke in a vague sort of way, which might have meant either:—"Question me!"; or:—"It is no concern of yours where I stopped."

Mrs. Carteret acted on the first interpretation. "Fred! What's the matter? *Something's* the matter. . . . You *have* quarrelled." For she remembered the boy Eric's semi-report of a shine, or scrum, and knew it must have meant more than an ordinary tiff.

Fred was relieved from the embarrassment of having to inaugurate his disclosure—always a tax on one's adroitness—and felt he could speak and be dignified. After all, he was quite a young man. "Cintra and I have not quarrelled. But . . ."

"But what?"

"We have decided that it is better for both of us that we should consider our engagement at an end. Perhaps I ought to say—*she* has decided. It was no wish of mine."

The first dozen words of this speech pointed to an everyday lovers' quarrel, which their hearer might have laughed at. A shine or a scrum! Its conclusion stopped her, backed as it was by something in her son's appearance. For all the resources of Waterloo Main Line had not obliterated the marks of his sleepless night and its excitements. "Is it so serious?" said she, and waited for him to tell her more.

But his reply was:—"It is. Perfectly serious. . . . If you don't mind, I would much rather tell you some other time—some time later . . ."

"Just as you please, Fred dear!" He, however, went on explaining, as people usually do when they have announced their intention of keeping silence. Their decision—or rather her decision—had turned on a point he did not feel free to talk about. "Even to you, dear mother!" said Fred. But he was a little disconcerted at her saying, as one who recognises the routine of events—no otherwise:—"Jealousy, I suppose?"

"Not in the ordinary sense," said Fred, prompted by a chivalrous feeling toward Cintra. He stopped short in his justification, from an uncertainty about the non-ordinary sense in which jealousy figured in this case. It was more easily hinted at than grappled with.

His mother seemed content to leave niceties about jealousy to be dealt with later. "Just please tell me," said she, "what you have been doing with yourself all night. Where have you been?"

"Who—I? I went for a walk."

"For a walk? Where?"

"Oh, Guildford way. Some distance. I felt like a long walk."

"You foolish boy! And now you're quite worn out. You've been walking all night. That's what it comes to."

"I suppose it comes to that. But it was good for me. You know—I don't knock up easily. Come, Mother, you do know that!" Indeed, the reaction of his feverish attack of energy had not come yet. He had in him still the materials for a laugh at his own absurdity,—his way of taking a disappointment. But when his mother, only half believing him in earnest even now, expressed her incredulity, he put this spirit of levity aside, saying with a seriousness she could not doubt, that it was all over between him and Cintra. She was not to blame at all, and his own blame for himself was very slight. They had misunderstood themselves and each other, and the wisest thing they could do now was to dwell on the past as little as possible. His mother wondered, in her own heart, whether the young lady was taking the matter equally philosophically.

"Well, my dear boy," she said, "since you wish me not to ask questions about it, I'll ask none—at least, not just yet awhile. That's what you mean, isn't it?"

"That's what I mean. Full particulars some of these days! Just now, I'm rather . . ."

"I understand. But there's one thing. . . . You must forgive me, Fred, but really—I must know . . ." She regretted the necessity for making her son the partner of a perplexity she might have kept to herself. But how avoid it? What was to be said to Nancy? There was that poor girl in the next room, probably hearing their voices through the wall, and anticipating a cheerful report of Upper Norwood, as consolation for an aching head. Fred *must* determine how much should be said to her.

"Oh—Elbows?" said he, unfeelingly. "Tell Elbows Cintra has broken it off, and I'm not going to cry my eyes out."

His mother remonstrated. "Fred—dear! I can't tell her only that. She'll want to know more than that."

"Very likely. Then she must wait for her sister's account of it. She'll write—Cintra will. She won't come. . . . I say!"

"What?"

"May I have a cigar and make the place smell? I haven't had a smoke yet."

"Certainly, my dear! Smoke as much as you like, all things considered!"

"Yes—but I haven't a cigar. My Havanas are just inside the oak cabinet in the next room, and that young woman's there." Mrs. Carteret undertook to find the cigars.

"I heard Fred had come. How did he leave them last night? Of course they knew nothing about my smash?" Thus Nancy to the cigar-seeker, who hoped she was asleep, and was proceeding furtively, that she might not rouse her.

"Of course not! How should they? He knew nothing himself till I told him just now."

"Did he say serve me right?"

"Nonsense, child! However, I must say he might have been more sympathetic. I told him you were not badly hurt, though, there's that to be considered."

"I am not hurt at all. How are the lovers getting on? Are they quarrelling?"

Was she to be told, or not? Mrs. Carteret ran away, to avoid decision. "I'll take him his cigars," she said. "I'm coming back." Then, in the front parlour again, talking to Fred, she said:—"What am I to say to the girl? My dear boy, you have no idea how embarrassing it is."

He, lighting his cigar, replied:—"Say there's a coolness. Don't have been told anything about it. Why should you? Cintra will write it all to her—you see if she doesn't. . . . But—stop a minute! How will they know she isn't coming back?"

"That's all settled. Her brother came first thing this morning—the boy Eric. He has got back by now. . . . Oh dear yes, long ago! But he did not know that anything serious between you . . ."

Fred finished the sentence, which hung fire:—"Was going on? No—he wouldn't. Cintra wouldn't tell him. Besides, he came away so early—he would not have seen her." He reflected and smoked, while she sat silent; then said:—"No, I do not see, Mother dear, that you are in any way bound to know anything at all about it. Bother Elbows!"

She replied quietly:—"It's easy to 'bother Elbows,' dear!—much easier than to look in her face and answer her questions."

And Fred felt that this was true, and in his secret heart was not sorry that present conditions did not favour an interview with the young lady who had possession of his apartment.

The hour of reaction after excitement was at hand for Fred, and it came after his mother had given him some lunch. In the course of this meal he passed through three distinct stages, the first of pretence that he didn't want anything to eat, and could discuss his unfortunate love-affair in cold blood, with the strictest impartiality; the second, the natural consequence of his scratch breakfast at the railway station, a stage of ravenousness; and the third, one of fast-increasing drowsiness which began by strangling loquacity, and ended in futile struggles against collapse, so palpable that his mother recognised them candidly and told him that the sooner he lay down and went sound asleep the better. He accepted the resources of the dining-room—a sofa; and Lipscombe was instructed to abstain *sine die* from clearing away, to the end that Mr. Frederic should have his sleep out.

Mrs. Carteret knew it would be impossible to keep the facts from Nancy, but she wanted to communicate them to her in such a way as to favour the construction—if Nancy desired it—of their pointing to nothing worse than a temporary estrangement and a reconciliation. So she thought it best on the whole to take the initiative. If it was “elicited” from her, all the worse for her chances of making light of it!

She did not feel, however, that any alacrity on her part to return to the subject was called for; that might even have defeated her object. Equable, philosophical indifference was the safe attitude, with an absolute unreluctance to talk of it if invited to do so. Therefore, when Nancy repeated her question:—“Didn't Fred tell you how he and Cintra are getting on? Are they quarrelling?”—she responded without emotion:—“Yes—they're quarrelling—at present;” the implication being that she, at least, had no belief either way as to the permanency or intensity of the quarrel.

“What idiots lovers are!” said Nancy.

“Proverbially so, my dear!” said Mrs. Carteret.

“What's it all about, this time?”

“The usual thing, I believe. Fred had been looking at some other young lady.”

“Not Mr. Snaith's Lucy?” The first word was fired off like a gun. Mrs. Carteret had had experience of her young friend's penetration, but she was taken aback. She had been under the

impression that the powerful effect produced by Mr. Snaith's Lucy on her son had been visible to no one but herself; because Nancy, though she had testified to her sister's wroth against the beauty, had never seemed alive to that effect from any personal observation. Although certainly she had shown that she was not in the dark about possibilities, she had not included in them a fluctuation in the stability of an attachment nearly two years old, under the witchery of a mere pair of black eyes. Nancy's pounce on a definition of what the usual thing was, in this case, had shown that she must have been conscious—or, suppose we say, subconscious?—of Fred's susceptibility to their influence.

Mrs. Carteret merely noted that her young friend was probably awake to the facts, and did not pry into her mind. "How can I tell whether it was Mr. Snaith's Lucy, or someone else's Lucy?" said she, as though the individual was a matter of little moment. Lovers' fancies—all delusion!

"They'll come all to rights—make it up again. See if they don't!" Nancy kept that head of hers very still on the pillow, and seemed careful not to open her eyes. Also, her words came, as it were, cautiously—rather on tiptoe. Mrs. Carteret knew exactly what she felt like.

Yes, that was the best frame of mind to encourage, clearly. They would make it up again. Nothing would result from this shine or scrum. No bystander need fret or interfere. Mrs. Carteret said nothing to Nancy of how Fred had walked about all night over it, nor of how he had gone to sleep on the sofa in the dining-room. It would only have made her feel herself an intruder. It was rather satisfactory to have this excuse for omitting what seemed likely to accentuate the seriousness of the situation.

The Fred who woke up on that sofa the best part of two hours later was a very different Fred from the one that may be said to have swaggered into an abrupt half-hour's nap, warranted to awake refreshed, confident that rest would renew in him a philosophical spirit, which would look the facts of life straight in the face, and garner the fruits of experience for judicious consumption in the future. He—the awakener—was, on the contrary, a woebegone parody of his former self, an abject second volume with a Table of Discontents at the beginning and an Index that referred the reader, on self-perusal, to nothing but misprints. He was not over-certain, for an unpleasant minute or two, what manner of thing he was, or what had happened to

it. He could only stretch himself and rub his eyes and wait for reluctant Memory to re-form the world he had to live in.

He knew there was a rock ahead that he could nowise steer clear of—the communication of his altered circumstances to Charley Snaith. He gradually changed, from mere misgiving as to how he should word it, to a fixed desire to get the job over. But what a tale to have to tell! No ancient dwelling-madhouse or sanehouse—to convert into two air-castles at pleasure. No front drive common to both, through lawn and garden-bed ring-ing changes all the year on all the Botany he didn't know the names of, from the first violet to the last chrysanthemum! No grounds of an acre and a quarter in the rear, large enough to lay out; large enough to show visitors over—almost! No oaken stairways for their mistresses to be graceful on, with light and shade effects. . . .

He shrank suddenly from his own mind—which the story is following—at this point. For he found that one of two images, of the two possible mistresses, on the two actual staircases, was dim; while the other was vivid, and displaced it. He felt a traitor to his friend, more than to the displaced image, at the vividness of the dark-eyed image which had ousted it. He tried to refer this activity of his imagination to Cintra's own decision to end their engagement, and was not so successful as he could have wished. Was that decision, after all, an arbitrary outcome of a groundless jealousy? He thrust the question aside, angrily. But he never answered it.

Although tea was beginning to be spoken of as a possibility very shortly after he awoke, he did not wait for its appearance, but went away to his chambers. The presence of Nancy in the house was an embarrassment to him, although it was safe enough not to reach interview-point. He had always felt her an embarrassment, considered merely as a provisional blood-relation, ratified by occasional ungracious pecks. But a disembodied sister-in-law!—that was what he felt she was. He would find plenty to do at his rooms—letters to write and what not—till Charley made his appearance from the office. An uncomfortable thought, now! Nevertheless, he screwed up his courage, and went.

He found plenty to do, and did none of it. He was altogether too *désœuvré* even for the simplest letter-writing. As for turning to on the provisional specification of the Non-Vibratory Engine, that was entirely out of the question. He felt, as he looked at the clean, completed elevations of it, that had been a

joy to his soul on Saturday, that the condition of his mind towards them was painfully near to a working version of Ignorance—something at least that answered the purpose in practice. If your brain swims and you can't know anything, you know as little of the trade you learned in boyhood as—for instance—the Average Man knows of Aramaic. Fred's brain swam; or rather, perhaps, sank—for the swimmer at least strikes out—as he gazed vacantly at what had been so keen an interest to him only last week. He had actually made those drawings! All the concession he could make to them now was that he would not tear them up. However, he might do so even now if he looked at them too much. The only safety was in passivity—silence and waiting. Suppose he went out for another walk, a short one this time, just to get through the hour or so that must pass before his friend's return. Yes—that would do!! And he could leave a note in Charley's letter-box to stop his running away if he found no one. He wrote:—"If I'm not back when you come in, don't go away without seeing me. I have something to . . ." he paused here; he wanted to hint that the something was serious, and "something to tell" might mean either good news or bad. He could not find a phrase that exactly met his requirements, and got bewildered in the choice of one. Every one he thought of seemed either jocular or tragic, and he wanted to avoid both. He shook his head at intervals, as one thing after another offered itself and was condemned. He decided on crossing out "have something to," and making it read, "I want to talk to you." It didn't read right, but he had to come to a decision.

Then he found himself loitering in the Temple Garden, listening to a bird. It was, like enough, the same bird that was singing there just a year ago, when he and Charley got the two girls, Cintra and Nancy, to come to tea at their rooms and be taken all about and shown things. His engagement was then not six months old, and everything was rose-coloured. It seemed a thousand years ago now; but vividly clear, like some of the earliest memories of youth. What was a keen discomfort to his soul—almost a nightmare—was, not so much the loss of that bewitching phase of early love as the terrible thoroughness with which it had vanished. And so suddenly! But a few weeks since—although perhaps they had steadied down a little latterly—he and Cintra were still in a land of enchantment, laying out imaginary rose-gardens in other lands that awaited their arrival. Were all man's garments woven by him only that

he might be clothed with derision? Did he never reap the harvest of his own sowing, except indeed to find the wheat-ears empty, and the plants run to leaf? Were all our dolls stuffed with sawdust?

Where was the life that late they led? It was there but yesterday, in outward seeming at least, when he started away for Norwood in the fresh hours of a Sunday morning in May, meeting scarcely a soul but milkmen and early communicants. He could not recall that his anticipations of a joyous greeting from her on his arrival were lukewarm, as he surrendered his railway ticket at Gipsy Hill Station to a station master who returned him the crossed half he had just found unused in his waistcoat pocket, as he locked his office up for its Sunday morning rest. In fact, the effect this exploded ticket had on him was to bring back his expectation of Cintra, fresh and living as the May morning itself, and all-powerful—yes, that certainly had been so!—to banish by her presence suspicions of any other image than her own. It was Fred's own Self that he spoke to, and that Self did not disclaim the suggestion he had imputed to it. He felt piqued at its lack of alacrity to do so. For so far from helping him, that Self kept silence lest it should say:—"Yes—you had your reason for wanting Cintra's power over you to assert itself, to protect you against that other identity that was working to estrange you from her." If this is a little complex, let him who reads this story reflect what a complex thing the human mind is, and look leniently upon its difficulties.

Fred threw the half railway ticket away, as though by doing so he could also throw away the train of thought it had suggested, and walked away to be out of sight of it. But it happened to attract the notice of some juveniles who had found their way into the Garden, in the belief that their presence would be tolerated by Authority, so long as they didn't pluck the flowers or walk on the grass, but with reservations of intention to do both if the absence of Authority could be relied on. They were—if pronounced as by their family connection—Heaverarris and her boyby, or more properly her mother's boyby, she being only eleven, and her little brother Tommyarris, who was not yet six. This young man, catching sight of the railway ticket where it fell, picked it up and, acting under instructions from his sister Heaver, pursued the gentleman who had apparently dropped it, and held it out towards him without explanation.

"Well, old chap!" said Fred. "Is that for me? What's your name?" He didn't want to know. He only asked to make conversation; but he was told a name, not over distinctly. He guessed particulars, rightly. "Thomas Harris—is that it? . . . Well, I don't want it? You may have it."

But the youth was not prepared to have the goods returned on his hands in that way. He began a confused statement, from which Fred gathered that he was endeavouring to cite his sister as an authority for something inaudible. He repeated several times:—"Moy sister Heaver—moy sister Heaver—" and then stopped suddenly, pointing. "That's her," said he.

"Oh, that's your sister Eva, is it? Very well, Thomas Harris. Now what does your sister Eva say?"

Thomas Harris removed from his mouth a thumb, sucked clean, which had been one of the chief causes of his inaudibility; and said, not without a kind of distinctness:—"Moy sister Heaver said a hoy'p'ny."

Fred understood that he was expected to produce this sum in exchange for the void and valueless ticket he had thrown away. He pointed out that the ticket was useless to him; but, he said, he was not prepared to disappoint Thomas Harris, who had had no means of knowing this, and had acted, no doubt, in perfect good faith. He handed the amount to the claimant, with the words:—"There, that's for you, Thomas Harris;" and then, considering the incident closed, walked away towards the Embankment, leaving Thomas standing gazing after him, with his thumb replaced for further cleaning.

He found a seat near Cleopatra's Needle, and tried to banish all the haunting ideas the last twenty-four hours had left him as an unwelcome inheritance. He tried to think of Cleopatra, who surely was far off enough from any of them. In vain! For the first thought of her and her appearances in literature suggested the question—was she dark or was she fair? Was she—for instance—like Cintra? Or was she like . . . He made a resolute effort to drive the first face that came to him out of his mind, and substitute some other than Lucy Hinchliffe's. Remember that to the conscience of this unhappy young man the slightest concession to the witchery of that young lady was an act of disloyalty to Charley Snaith, his fast friend of so many long years. He might have recalled Browning's lines:—

*"One should master one's passions—love, in chief,—
And be loyal to one's friends."*

But he stopped them on the threshold of his mind. For he could not admit them without admitting also that they had been justified in knocking at his door. He angrily resented their intrusion.

A fig for Cleopatra! A mummy, long ago, more likely than not. He jumped up from the seat, and turned to go. But he was confronted by Thomas Harris—if the phrase can be used of a fraction face to face with an integer—who had tracked him down with a defined purpose. Fred had to give attention to his statement to discover it. It sounded somewhat like this:—"You divved me vis hoy'p'ny faw me. I wants anuvver hoy'p'ny faw my sister Heaver. Vat's her, wiv boyby, free-munce." His last words as he pointed her out—which he evidently looked upon as so much distinction, like K.C.B. or F.R.S.—meant the age of the baby.

"I fear," said Fred, "that you are an impostor and an extortioner. But—as Baby is only three months old—I will give you another hoy'p'ny. It doesn't follow, strictly, but we mustn't be too particular." Thomas accepted the second halfpenny and ran away to his sister Eva, bearing a coin in either hand. It appeared then to Fred that Eva blew Thomas's nose for him, after taking charge of his halfpenny as well as her own, and departed with an appearance of having thought of an investment. Charley Snaith would be back in half an hour now. He turned to go to the chambers. But there was plenty of time to take it easily. Good Lord, yes! Four-forty-five! He put his watch back in its pocket, and sauntered. In fact, he walked farther than he need have done, to spin out the time.

Whenever one has anything to communicate of importance, be it sad or joyous, one is pretty sure to dwell on the ways and means of the communication; sadly or joyously, as may be. And nothing is more certain than the way our forecast never comes about. The good news gets blurted out before its time; all one's neat tropes and clever climaxes are lost. And the bad news gets the bit in its teeth and carries one away—it guessed at once from one's too visible self-command, that one flatters oneself is so sure to serve us at our need. Even so Fred was at work on his fiftieth mental rehearsal of his probable revelation to his friend when all his elaborations were upset by a hansom whose fare was shouting to its driver to stop. For the fare was Charley himself, wild with excitement beyond what a reasonable Briton shows merely because he identifies a friend in the street.

"Hoy—*stawp!* Why the devil don't you stop? . . . Here, Fred, come along in! I *have* got a bit of news for you. . . . Where to?—why, where I told you,—thirteen, Bolt Court" This of course was to the driver, enquiring through the ceiling. "If my bit of news doesn't make you sit up and think, nothing ever will. Now guess!" He seized Fred's arm and fixed his eyes on his face, waiting. He was quite beside himself with exultation at this thing, whatever it was.

"My uncle's found!" Would not this have been any man's guess, all his surroundings being Fred's at the moment? The young man's face beamed. This was a noble makeweight to all the miseries. The cloud had lifted.

But Charley's exultation was destined to end abruptly. He went quite pale and his breath caught as he said:—"My God—the fool I was, not to see that!"

"Why—what—what—what is it? Tell me, old chap!"

"Dear old boy! I'm more sorry than I can tell you. But . . . but it isn't your uncle. I only wish it were."

Fred felt exactly as if a heavy blow on the head had left him dizzy. But he saw, through his dizziness, that his first duty was towards his friend. He must save him from the idea that he had caused needless pain, at any cost in fibbing. He really managed a very creditable laugh, all things considered. "I didn't believe it, you know," said he. He utilised a slight flash of misgiving that he had shut his eyes to a few seconds since. "You wouldn't have said, 'now guess!' about that. Now would you?"

"No—I shouldn't. Of course I shouldn't. . . ."

"Let's have the good piece of news. Out with it!" He thought it best to assume an air of genial incredulity.

"Wait till you hear, you unbelieving Thomas. You know that Lucy and I had fixed Sunday to go and look over the Madhouse? Well, we went."

"And the day's fixed? Is that it?"

"Shut up! Wait till you hear. We examined the house from garret to cellar. . . ."

"And she didn't like it because of Mrs. Grewbeer's sink."

"How did you know that?"

"Never you mind! Go on—I'll tell you presently."

"Very well—me first, then! We examined the house, and Lucy did some capital pretending—regularly took *me* in. . . . What for? Why, don't you see? One should always run down what one wants to buy, and crack up what one wants to sell."

"Right you are! Like bulls and bears on the Stock Exchange. Cut along."

"No—it's too good to tell in a hurry. . . . Yes—this house—*any* house—what does it matter?" This was to the cabman, who insisted on fulfilling his mission, backing his cab into the kerbstone in the effort to obtain his ideal of stopping at a door, a thing not achieved until a line drawn at right angles to the diagonals of that door passes through the cab's centre of gravity.

"Now, we may as well have tea before you tell your news," says Fred. He was as cool as that over it; or perhaps it was that, now his own revelation was so soon inevitable, he was glad to catch at any pretext to postpone it; ever so little. Anyhow, the two were enjoying the output of his gas-kettle before he gave his friend, whom he had stopped in one or two false starts, leave to go on with his story. "Now for it, old chap!" said he, lighting a cigarette.

Charley sipped his tea with an eye on his hearer, not to miss any of the effect of his communication. "Now for it!" said he. "Where was I? . . . Oh yes—we went over the house, and I assure you I was regularly taken in. I thought Lucy hated the place. Judge of my surprise, then . . . Sounds like a narrative, don't it? In a book, you know."

"Go ahead! 'Judge of your surprise' . . ."

"When Lucy turned round to me in the trap, and said:—'I'm going to buy that house, Charles,' I was taken aback because, don't you know, it *was* rather sudden."

"Very." There was in Fred's manner just enough of the effect the news had had upon him—for was this a new embarrassment, in view of what he himself was keeping back?—to make its teller feel a sort of chill. It was not the acclamation of delight he had looked forward to.

The interpretation he put upon it was the wrong one. But it was absolutely the only one possible to his complete unsuspectance of what his friend had to tell him. He took its accuracy for granted, past all question. "That was exactly what crossed my mind immediately," said he. "The answer I made to Lucy was 'Fred won't like that'; and I explained to her that—well!—that you would want to be in it. It would have to be a joint-stock job, or nothing."

"Or nothing," said Fred.

Charley took the parched way in which he spoke to be a mere expression of his decision not to be out of it. "Or nothing," he repeated. "I rubbed that well in. But—stop a minute and let

me tell you." For Fred was going to speak. "She gave me all her reasons, and I'm sure you'll admit . . . No—do shut up, old chap, and let me finish what she said. She said:—'Is not Mr. Carteret dependent on the permission of his trustee, or somebody's trustee?' Her expression was 'Trusteeship has to be fiddled with, somehow.' I explained to her that you were certain there would be no difficulty there, when the whole scheme was laid before Dr. Carteret. 'But,' said she, 'when will the scheme be laid before Dr. Carteret?' I said as soon as he came back, which of course must be very soon, unless . . ."

"Go on."

"Well, she pulled me up short, repeating my words, 'Very soon, unless! Unless what? Can you answer for how soon? And suppose in the meanwhile someone cuts in and buys the house?' I was obliged to admit that this would be very disappointing and awkward. Then she said—and I think, Fred, you'll see from this how reasonable and—a—in fact generous Lucy's motives are,"—Fred threw in a chorus of assent and approval—"she said it would merely be the question of her mother writing a cheque, which she could do as easily as not—I believe that is the case, when it's only four figures—and then an arrangement could be made. I should have to find out what to call it. If I couldn't, where was the use of my being a solicitor? Ha, ha, ha!"

Fred's echo was perfunctory; a very cheerless laugh by comparison. Charley set this down to his own timid indulgence in the hypothesis that the Doctor's disappearance was final. He could not tie himself to the pretence that reappearance was certain in the nature of things. Fred was profuse in his acknowledgments of Miss Hinchliffe's generosity; so much so that Charley, in the interests of truth, made a sub-remark:—"Of course it is her mother's money. But I suppose it comes to the same thing." Fred said:—"Same in principle, anyhow." He added a special tribute to the elder lady, as an obvious inference from her cheque-writing faculty:—"Miss Hinchliffe's mother must be the right sort."

"I say, Fred. I wish you'd call her Lucy. To oblige me!"

"Well—Lucy's mother, then. It's a mere question of usage."

"I'll call Cintra 'Cintra,' you know, as a set-off. I will, upon my word. . . . What's that?" For Fred was saying something inaudible. He repeated it, and Charley echoed back:—"Question won't be raised? No, old chap! Because nobody will raise it. It will raise itself."

"Charley!"

"Hullo?" This was in response to Fred's tone of voice, which was more than uneasy. Also, his hand was restless, would not leave his moustache in peace, nor his watch-chain, nor the fingers of its fellow.

He had to say it now. "I've been wanting to say something . . . only couldn't see my way. . . . I say, Charley . . ."

"Eh—eh—what! What's all that? You say! What do you say, old man? . . . Fred dear, what is it?" He paused a second or so, and his friend's face illuminated him. "You haven't—you surely haven't—fallen out with Cintra?"

Fred drew his fingers dreamily over his eyes, and said in a dreary way:—"There is no Cintra. She is Miss Fraser—for me, at any rate. . . . No—I know what you are going to say. Don't say it. It is for good. It *can't* be made up. We have not quarrelled. We shall not quarrel. But we have made a discovery. The love of neither of us was what the other asked, and the thing comes naturally to an end."

"I don't believe you. I *won't* believe you. There never was a quarrel that couldn't be made up—only go the right way about it. . . ."

"I said there was *no* quarrel, and I mean it. There is none. I cannot tell you what it was that led us to find out the truth. Because that's the English of it. We have been under a delusion. Anyhow, the thing's at an end! At an end—at an end! Don't run away with the idea that it can be patched up. And, Charley—about that house! I suppose Miss Hinchliffe's . . . well, Lucy's . . . intention—her idea . . ."

"Buying the lease? Yes, go on."

"I suppose it hinged on . . . the joint-stock arrangement, and that fizzles out. What a good job I was in time to tell you!"

A bystander would have found it difficult to guess the young lawyer's thoughts. Perplexed gravity was natural under the circumstances, but why did he withhold a cordial assent to Fred's expression of satisfaction? He seemed either to be doing that, or thinking of something else. A perceptible pause followed, of silence; and then he said in a perfunctory way—a tone of *pro-forma* acquiescence:—"Good job—yes. Very good job!" and changed the subject.

What had Fred done about telling his mother of this? Would she not be very much upset about it? She had taken very kindly to her future daughter-in-law, had she not?

Fred explained, and told—as was easy enough now he had divulged the main fact—of his various adventures since he parted from Cintra the day before. He derided himself without remorse for his ridiculous night-excursion, more particularly for that preposterous expedition to the Old Madhouse, and the way he had gone off on a false scent about the parson that had tumbled into a mill-pond. He ascribed whatever was visible in his exterior of the effects of perturbation and excitement more to this section of his adventures than to the collapse of his love-affair, about which he was ostentatiously philosophical. It was much better for both of them, and Cintra would become the happy wife of some fellow much better than himself—well, of another sort, anyhow! He could only rejoice, for his part, that they had discovered their mistake in time. An ill-assorted union, etcetera! He paid a tribute to Cintra's courage in taking the step she had done, and ending matters. For the thing was entirely her doing. He himself would just have gone blindly on, in a course which could have led to no true happiness for either of them. Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera!

"But you may fancy, Charley old chap, what a devil of a stew I got in owing to that young fool's story at Ripley, and what a nervy condition I was in altogether, from my hearing you sing out again at The Cedars."

"Hearing me sing out again at The Cedars?"

"Yes—don't you recollect? Me and the old woman both—we got it into our heads that you sang out:—'Come back, Fred!' . . . Oh, you recollect!"

"I—think—I do. Ye-es! Just down that long passage."

"Just there. Well!—I heard the same voice over again. Same words and all!"

"Reaction of memory on nervous overstrain. It shows."

"Yes—it sh . . s." Charley was looking at his watch. "Shall I come and chat while you dress? I haven't got to, myself. I'm only going to the Vale."

"All right—but there's no hurry for a few minutes. I'm not going to my young woman this evening. Dining at Lowkins's—client of ours—Subterranean Heat Company—you know? But I shall try to get round to Trymer, late. I must get ten minutes talk with him to-night." He repeated these last words twice, as though the importance of this talk was pressing.

Fred might have asked him why, but he had just remembered

a collateral event his narrative had overlooked. "By-the-bye," said he, "I was forgetting all about Elbows."

"What about Elbows? She's not picked up a sweetheart?"

"Not that I know of. But she's very nearly killed herself."

"What for . . . I mean—how's she done that?" Fred gave an account of the accident. His friend listened absently, saying at the conclusion of it:—"Well, I'm glad the young woman's not seriously hurt. I'll go as far as that."

Fred considered, and said:—"Well—I'll join you. Only don't you go any further, young man." To which Mr. Charley replied:—"No fear!" So unpopular with them was this young lady at that date.

That anticipation that the man supposed to be drowned in Flinders's mill-pond would solve the mystery of Dr. Carteret's disappearance had a curious effect afterwards on Fred's mind. It had been a reality to him for a couple of hours or more, and the relief he felt on learning that it was altogether misplaced and illusory did not bring back the confidence he had felt before that his uncle *must be alive* and well somewhere, and that the whole thing would surely be explained. It seemed to give the theory of the vanished man's death a foothold in his imagination, although his mere reasoning powers refused to be affected by it. It ought by rights to have left both imagination and reason untouched. But the right to be rigidly logical is one that human nature very seldom claims. This incident brought Fred nearer to a belief that he had seen his uncle for the last time than anything that had happened before.

CHAPTER XVI

MR. CHARLEY SNAITH had dined at Mr. Lowkins's, and was enjoying a late cigar with his principal, Mr. Trymer, whose wife and daughter had taken a guest to the play. He had laid his business before Mr. Trymer, and Mr. Trymer had thought it well over.

Mr. Trymer was a gentleman who had earned a reputation of great profundity for his opinions, by never expressing any. Or rather, he had a happy faculty of making advice not to do this, that, or the other sound exactly like an exhortation towards energy in respect of that, the other, or this. So much so that clients would leave Lincoln's Inn under the impression that he had armed them at all points for decisive action, to find it gradually dawn upon them—by the time they reached Tottenham Court Road, for instance—that they had been enjoined on no account to say anything; to be most careful not to write anything; to refuse to see anybody, even in the presence of several able-bodied witnesses, and in short to mould their behaviour on that of a rock-limpet. His advice to litigious persons alone to keep out of Law Courts would have been enough to make the reputation of his firm.

One very extraordinary circumstance about this gentleman was that his sound sense and legal acumen impressed those with whom he was brought in contact more and more in proportion to the length of their acquaintance. One would have imagined the contrary; that a new employee, for instance, would have been disabused of his exalted opinion of his principal after a certain lapse of time without speech from the Oracle. But the reverse was the case. Here was Mr. Charles Snaith, who had passed through a preliminary clerkship before he became a junior partner, and who still believed in the infallibility of that Oracle in spite of the fact that its decisions remained unspoken. "I've come to tap your brains, Mr. Trymer, on a knotty point," had been his introduction to his explanation of his visit at so late an hour, when he surprised that gentleman by his appearance after dinner with the Lowkinsees. Mr. Trymer had replied:—"My dear Snaith, my experience and professional abilities—such as they are—are at your service now as always. This is the

comfortablest chair. Take it." After which Charley had told him what had brought him to the fountain-head of legal wisdom.

"On thinking it well over," said the Oracle, three-quarters of an hour later, "my strong impression is, that any attempt on your part to influence the course of events would be unsuccessful. Yes. Un—suc—cessful." Charley looked disappointed, and the Oracle started on a recapitulation of facts. "If I understand you rightly, you had concise instructions from this lady—whose daughter I shall hope to have the opportunity of congratulating shortly on her marriage with"—here the speaker adopted a tone of uncalled-for slyness—"with a *young friend of mine*—to write a definite offer of eighteen hundred pounds for the purchase of this lease, the sum named by the vendor being two thousand."

"Ye-es—in fact, Lucy settled the matter; told her mother she must make the offer, and told me I must write the letter. I don't see that I had any choice," said Charley, somewhat ruefully.

Said Mr. Trymer, in a parenthesis:—"Fifteen hundred quite enough—quite enough!"

"So I said. But Lucy said if she gave way and allowed it to be eighteen hundred, that was as much as any mother could expect, and she wasn't going to run any risk of losing the horse. What could I do?"

"I see. You were acting under the instructions of a client whom you were unable to influence."

"Precisely."

"And—as I understand—circumstances have arisen which make the proposed arrangement most undesirable."

"I am afraid so."

"H'm! Now, always if I understand you rightly, you do not ask my advice or opinion on any question but this:—"Does your client stand committed to the purchase of this property?"

"Yes—that is really what I want to know."

The profundity and responsibility of Mr. Trymer's appearance was most impressive as he replied:—"Subject to certain conditions which might—or might not—be implied by the terms of the contract, I should say distinctly yes,"—Mr. Snaith looked crestfallen—"or no." An addendum which made Charley pick up his spirits.

"As for instance . . . the conditions . . . ?" said he.

"On condition—for instance—that the offer was accepted within twenty-four hours, unconditionally, I should say it would

be extremely difficult to withdraw from it—extremely difficult.”

“They only got my letter this morning. Or rather, I doubt if the solicitors have got the offer yet. I sent it to the agent at Wimbledon. Suppose I were to call on them to-morrow and put the case . . . would that . . . ?”

“Advance matters? No—I should say not—certainly not. If I am asked to advise in any case, my advice is always ‘Never do things!’ My dear Snaith, when you are my age you will know, what I know, that out of every hundred mistakes that are made, ninety-nine are due to someone having done something. The odd one may be due to inactivity. But my advice is—leave well alone, in case you make it bad; and leave ill alone, in case you make it worse.” Mr. Trymer’s appearance as he said this was so intensely responsible that had Experience herself been speaking, the words could not have seemed more impressive.

“Then, in fact,” said Charley, “you recommend me to leave matters as they are?”

“As they are.”

“Then what do you suppose will happen? Will Mrs. Hinchliffe be under an obligation to purchase the house?”

“I should say not. No, I should say not. If the vendors write accepting the offer unconditionally, of course it may call for a little circumspection. We shall have to examine the title-deeds.”

“And suppose they turn out indisputably sound?”

“My dear sir, if they turn out so sound that this lady is under a legal obligation to be satisfied with them, they will be the first examples of such instruments that have come within my experience. I have yet to learn that there exists a statutory obligation to be satisfied with any security, however sound. But I would lay any reasonable wager that on examination the title of this estate will not prove so flawless as to give no satisfactory ground for dissatisfaction. Anyway, let us examine them.”

Charley looked considerably comforted. But his Mentor had not exhausted all the legal possibilities of the case, and continued. “However, it won’t come to that. You’ll see, it won’t come to that. They’ll accept the offer, and they’ll impose some condition. Vendors always do. But—as I view the matter, and I think the Courts would bear me out—the lady’s offer was unconditional, and the imposition of a condition would release her from any obligation in respect of it.”

“And suppose they withdrew the condition?”

“Well—suppose they did! And suppose that she had been

wavering between two purchases, and had closed with the other on receipt of their conditions, accepting them as final. How then?"

"I appreciate that point," said Charley. "Thank you, Mr. Trymer." And he really felt grateful to his principal, who had indeed given more luminous guidance in this case than he had conceded to any client for a long time past.

They talked of other matters. "By-the-bye," said Mr. Trymer, very incidentally, "has that old gentleman turned up yet? Dr. What's-his-name? Your friend Fred's relation?"

"Why—no! Do you anticipate . . .?"

"That he'll turn up? Oh *dear* yes—sure to! Missing people have been known to vanish for good; but under circumstances. In this case I understand there were no circumstances."

"Absolutely none whatever!"

"No lady, naturally. But how about creditors? Creditors, without assets, become circumstances."

"Certainly no creditor-circumstances, and any amount of assets. As for the lady-circumstance, Fred had a theory. I fancy he's given it up though."

"Confidential, I suppose?"

"Well, I don't know. I think you would be an exception. Anyhow, I'll risk it." Charley gave a brief abstract of the early-love-affair theory, as he and Fred had worked it out together, in several chats.

"Nothing to be kept secret there that I can see," said Mr. Trymer. "At least, nothing juicy in the way of crime or immorality. Interesting perhaps—romantic—that sort of thing! Not probable."

"Improbability seems to me of the essence of the contract," said Charley. "We can't do without it."

"What does Mrs. Carteret believe—Master Fred's mother?"

Charley dropped his voice to answer:—"Murder," and raised it again, to say:—"But I fancy she's an impressible woman. Not hysterical, you know, but impressible."

Mr. Trymer was trying different ways of bringing his fingertips in contact. "If she's not hysterical," said he, "why, then—her impressions may be right." He left his thumbs in firm contact, expressive of trustworthy and non-hysterical conclusions, and disbarred his other fingers.

"We must hope not," said Charley. A sound came as of ladies returning from a theatre, and talking about a play. "I must be off," he continued. "I want to catch Fred before he

turns in." He professed insincere rapture, as he departed, at the opportunity vouchsafed to him of wishing Mrs. Trymer and her daughter a good-night apiece, and ran away to Praed Street to catch the last train. For Mr. Trymer lived in Porchester Terrace.

But when he got to the Temple, he saw no light in Fred's window, and inferred that he had gone to bed. So he had, more than an hour since, and had plunged straight down into the caverns of Sleep. And no wonder, considering what his previous night had been. So Mr. Charles Snaith went to bed himself.

Next morning saw the two young men at breakfast in Fred's room. The story may take up their conversation half-way through, and let it explain what preceded it.

Fred said, recurring to something his friend had just told him:—"I'm very much relieved to hear that. It really would have been an awful fix if Lucy's mother had stood committed. I suppose we may rely on Trymer."

"Oh dear yes! And on the Lord Chancellor. P'raps Trymer is the most trustworthy,—less liable to be run away with by sentiment. But, you know, it's just possible that Lucy will refuse to give the house up. You've no idea how—how *nuts* she was upon it."

Fred looked gloomy. "I hate the place," said he. "Can't help it, Charley."

"Not to be wondered at, under the circumstances! I should." A short silence, over the new-made grave of Fred's engagement. Then Charley took in sail. "When I say it's just possible Lucy will refuse to give the house up, perhaps I ought to put it that she isn't the least likely to do so. Not in practice. Because, you see, her nutness was conditional on the joint-stock occupancy."

Fred took no notice of his friend's high-handed treatment of the English language. "She knew nothing of what had taken place," he said. "She still thinks the arrangement stands. You must write at once and tell her. Or go and see her about it at once. Much better!"

"I'm going there this evening, old chap. Won't that do? You needn't fidget about Mrs. Hinchliffe and the purchase of the house, that's only a letter written. Trymer knows what he's about. You may rely on him. Anyhow, whether Lucy's mamma knows or not won't make any difference. . . . There's the post."

There was. And Mrs. Gamridge, who acted as domestic for

both households, or diggings-holds—if the name in commonest use by these young gentlemen can be so adapted—was signing for a registered letter. This was not a thing that Mrs. Gamridge could do offhand. Indeed, she would have saved ninety-per-cent of the time consumed, by appealing to her employers for their caligraphy. But she was too proud of her own to do that, and when Fred went into the passage to anticipate the slow development of the delivery, he found her with her head sideways on the window-sill, her tongue out, and the postman's book placed so that the eye she had left open for the purpose could note her pen's point travelling directly away from it. Even so the spectator of Holbein's two ambassadors at the National Gallery gets as near the picture as he may to detect the miraculous skill in perspective. It was the attitude of a Scribe, but not of such a one as the story's memory associates with Seti-Menephthah or Assur-Bani-Pal. Their scribes had a certain diabolical alacrity, and an appearance of preternatural skill that was wanting in Mrs. Gamridge.

"There, that'll do," said Fred, unfeelingly. He came back bearing letters and a small packet, which he put in his pocket. A letter in a lady's writing, which he read and pondered over a good deal, provoked his friend to an enquiry. "Mustn't know what she says, I suppose," said he.

"Why—no! At least, she didn't mean it for the public. But I suppose there's no harm in saying she takes all the blame on herself."

"What blame? Can't see that anyone's to blame."

"Says she ought to have spoken before—ought to have known her own mind better."

"If she *had* spoken before, she would only have thought she ought to have spoken *before*. Twig?"

"Oh yes—I twig, fast enough. Don't translate. *Before* is quite intelligible." Fred welcomed this view of the case, with somewhat too much promptitude. It enabled him to ignore any recent event—any new personality in particular—that had broken into his dream of what had seemed Love up to the date of its intrusion. He was grateful for any theory that made it possible to shut his eyes to Lucy Hinchliffe; especially when talking with Charley, to whom she was dedicated.

But—a mistake from the beginning! How could that be? His mind sought for the beginning. Was it a mistake, when he met Cintra at Mrs. Searcival's Cinderella, that they should sit through the next two dances together on the stairs, while

loquacious couples passed up and down; and, to play fair, took no notice of them? Was it a mistake that, when he found her father was "*the Professor Fraser*," he should jump so greedily at the chance of making that Professor's acquaintance—in spite of the fact that the Professor's specialty was Chemistry—on a pretence that was connected with Dynamics. He could so easily have avoided that mistake. After all, what connection was there between Vibration—Fred's particular weakness—and the Monomorphism of Molecules? As far as the story can recollect, that was the Professor's strong point; but it can't be sure. Were all the pretences he had been guilty of in order to establish a foothold in the family of the Professor's daughter mistakes? Would he not have done more wisely to discredit altogether the Professor's thesis, that, if nothing existed in Space but one Atom, Motion would not exist, than to make believe it was a point he had concentrated his faculties on, in vain, until he read the Professor's beautiful disquisition on it? If he had flouted it, probably he would not have been asked to the house again, and his growing intoxication of delight with the society of Cintra would never have ended in a climax. Was that climax, and its rapture as of a newly discovered land, the greatest mistake of all?

And the curious part of it all was, that nothing had marred this felicity of a plighted troth—mere squabbles apart, that neither believed to be discords, and that always ended in reconciliation—until . . . His reflections hung fire on the threshold of definition, and would not admit the share Charley's *fiancée*—unwittingly of course—had in his disillusionment. Yet honour and chivalry towards his dethroned idol shrank from accusing her of indulgence in unreasonable jealousy. And then, how specify its object, in the very presence of that object's unconscious devotee! Poor Charley!—his absolute unconsciousness of the forces co-operating towards confusion and mischief were a nightmare to his friend. There he sat, enjoying an after-breakfast cigar with a serene face—a face with a buried smile that spoke of happy hidden contemplations—a face that knew nothing of the seeds of turmoil in that invisible mind just across the table.

The story is sorry for both these young men: There was really no way out of the position—putting aside, of course, the possibility of Fred's disenchantment the next time he interviewed the witch; not at all out of the question, seeing that she might have a cold, and sniff or anything—no way except that

the two old friends from boyhood should be wrenched asunder because their two hearts had fallen into possession of the same chit. No way, except that Fred should *go*, like the gentleman in Mrs. Browning's poem who couldn't stay to supper because the lady was fair, and was able to strangle his soul with a lock of her yellow hair—you remember?—and whom the lady gave such a severe lecture to! Even admitting that Fred had been rash in vowing undying love to Cintra, as he had done on many occasions he recalled with embarrassment, not shame, did he deserve so cruel a position as the one in which he found himself?

He did not absolutely say to himself:—"I hope to God that next time I see her I shall hate her,"—meaning, of course, the enchantress. But he knew that if he could have said it, and his hope had been fulfilled, he would no longer have felt choked with disloyalty to his friend.

He disappeared into his sleeping-room with the registered packet unopened, and returned without it. Charley heard a small drawer opened, shut, and locked. He identified the parcel as the jeweller's cardboard box, almost certainly, in which the ring he had helped his friend to buy over a year ago had been enshrined by its vendor, over and above the satin-lined casket it lived in, stuck edgewise in a slot—Cintra's engaged ring. He wondered what became of all the returned presents, when trothplights miss fire. Was it true that jewellers offered to take them back at par on production of documentary proof of the engagement having come to an end, and less fifteen-per-cent anyhow? If the engagement revived, and the gentleman wanted the ring back, to go on again, did he sacrifice all the discount or how? He felt the interest in these issues of one who could never be personally involved in similar ones. *His* trothplight had its foundations in some Silurian system that never changed, by nature; was built on an outcrop of Primitive Trap in a desert of shifting sands—the sands of human weakness.

The young lady who was the other necessary factor to this immutability was a subject of wonder to a large circle of well-to-do card-leavers whose function as such brought them into touch with her mother's house in Devonshire Place, Regent's Park. This circle wondered at two things: the daughters at one, the mothers at the other. The former wondered what on earth could possess Lucy Hinchliffe to engage herself to that plain Mr. Snaith; the latter what on earth could possess her

mother to allow her to do so. Neither thing could be accounted for by anything short of possession.

The solution of the mystery was not really difficult. This mother and daughter belonged to a privileged class—a class that is in the confidence of Property. If you, who read this story, are middle-aged and fairly observant—and, it must add, if you mix with circles—you surely have chanced across examples of this privileged class. Have you never felt the force of the secret knowledge that Mrs. So-and-so or Lady Such-and-such have, of who is going to inherit what—or whose heir Snooks is, or where the Panjandrum property will go when old Lord Chit-terling dies? Mrs. So-and-so and Lady Such-and-such are the sort that say—when you have mentioned, for instance, some connection by marriage of your great-aunt Deborah:—"Let me see! She was a Penultimate, wasn't she?" Whereupon you have been fain to confess that you have not known the interesting fact, but that Mrs. Dabchick has very likely been a Penultimate, all the while.

But this has been at best a surface-symptom of the secret knowledge in the depths beneath of these ladies' minds. It exists nevertheless, and only comes to light when they have daughters, which indeed is generally the case. Then you awake one day to the fact that the swarm of young men whom these beves or clusters or groups of daughters have married is a well-connected swarm. One after another, as Lord This or Sir That succumbs—that's what they do in their walk of life—it is borne in upon you that you have been, as it were, entertaining a potential Duke or Baronet unawares, and that what seemed merely Tom or Bob for so many years was all along a territorial potentate. Also that the lady who has become his mother-in-law knew, and when she resigned herself so meekly to her daughters' love-matches, did so with a consciousness of the ace of trumps up her sleeve. She was in the confidence of Property. So, no doubt, was her daughter. But the daughters of this class do not participate actively in this communion with Property. They are content with the outer courts of her temple, and leave the functions of the Altar—the higher inner knowledge—to their mothers. What seems so curious to the likes of us, when the aforesaid potentate succumbs, and the obituary reveals his next of kin, always is, that we should have been for so long outsiders.

Why didn't Tom or Bob tell us that he would one day come into the Panjandrum estates? The answer is simple enough in

some cases. Tom or Bob hardly knows, himself. He is not the sort of fellow to advertise his connection with a bigwig if, as may happen, his father's family and his own are not on speaking terms. He may never have assimilated the idea—if his education kept him rather in the dark—that if the icy hand of Death were laid on sundry cousins he had never seen, always supposing those cousins to die without male issue, he would suddenly find himself overwhelmed with a huge income, countless acres, and responsibility. It is not the mission of this story to wonder at this; but, as to how Mrs. So-and-so and Lady Such-and-such come to know all about it, that certainly is a mystery on which it can throw no light. It can only surmise that they are in the confidence of Property.

Even so Mrs. Absalom Hinchliffe was in the confidence of Property about what was in store for Charley Snaith, in the event of three not improbable deaths, when she countenanced his addresses to her beautiful daughter Lucy, in spite of his looks, which were against him, and the fact that he was a mere solicitor. He might get into Parliament certainly. But after all—if he did . . . !

The question:—"Ought such beauty as Lucy Hinchliffe's to be thrown away on a mere solicitor, even with a seat in the House?" was asked and negatived by both mothers and daughters in that circle the story has referred to, each segment of which continually left its cards on every other, and frequently wrote on their backs that it was so sorry not to find it at home. Lucy had the faculty some girls have of exciting the admiration of her own sex, even when it made no secret of its jealousy.

As for Charley himself, if he had heard a suspicion of the purity of the motives of either mother or daughter expressed by any member of that or any other circle, his indignation would have been boundless. The worst he ever said of his mother-in-law-elect was that she was overpowering; for his estimate of her as an Orientalally-disposed female was hardly disparagement, and indeed might have been praise. Moreover, to him the complex possibilities of heirs to his great-uncle's wealth and position were too numerous to admit of speculations in which he could have any personal interest. Perhaps Mrs. Absalom Hinchliffe had among her Oriental dispositions powers of prophecy, and that they foretold, truly or falsely, that the bachelor Lord Nextley, the eldest son, would never marry and was sixty; that one of his married brothers would die without issue, and the other be limited to a female one. Anyhow, it would appear that she had

come to the conclusion that the prize was so big that a courageous mother would be justified in putting it to the touch, to win or lose it all. The story is inclined to the opinion that this lady was in the confidence of Property, and that that Goddess, or Principle, or Essence, or Abstract Idea, had breathed in her ear exactly what might possibly happen to the Panjandrum title and estates. As to her daughter it considers that possibly her conscience was unblemished, as all this sort of thing was really mamma's business, not hers.

And as for Charley—who while the story indulges in these speculations is on his way to Devonshire Place to dine on delicacies first and felicity next—he had been from his babyhood an illustration of how it is possible to know a fact to be true and know absolutely nothing more about it. Just as an examinee knows a subject only that he may pass in it, and forgets it like a shot the moment he is “through,” so Charley knew that his family was akin to a live Earl. If he was reminded of it, he did his duty by it, knew it for a second or so, and there an end. It would almost be imputing too great a mental activity to him to say that he forgot it.

He was in some trepidation about the news he carried, and not without hopes that it might be discredited on its merits. After all—a lovers' quarrel! Even unassisted by experts he had been more than half inclined to pooh-pooh Fred's certainty that an impassable chasm yawned between him and his late *fiancée*. Standing on the doorstep of No. 98 Devonshire Place, waiting for a bullet-headed butler of incredible responsibility to open the door to its utmost as though to admit a spread eagle, he indulged a hope that his disbelief in that chasm might be strengthened, even by the overpowering mother of his adored one. Of her refusal to believe that such an inauspicious end had come to his friend's immutabilities he had no doubt. Her faith in the reality of human love—in the bosom friend of her own chosen among mankind, that is to say—was too strong to permit her to believe offhand that such a rupture could be permanent. For Miss Hinchliffe had dwelt rapturously on the unchangeable nature of true love, showing—Charley thought—the purity and sweet integrity of her soul.

But he was destined to a certain disillusionment. For when the bullet-headed one had done his heralding, and he had been marshalled into the drawing-room, where the two ladies, in the grandest *tenué*, were standing in wait for guests, he used the first treasured moment of aside with his beloved to say to her:—

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"I say, Luce, they've burst up—Fred and Cintra." And he fully expected her to be shocked and astonished beyond measure.

He felt a perceptible chill when the young lady simply shrugged a beautiful shoulder very slightly through a downy boundary to which Madame Somebody, Robes et Modes, had recently said:—"Thus far shalt thou come and no further!" She did not seem the least surprised or taken aback, and only paid his rather panic-stricken manner the compliment of adding:—"You are thinking of the house, I see. You needn't fuss about that. I shan't allow it to make a difference, in any case. But you'll see they'll have made it up in a day or two." She spoke across the room to her mother:—"Do you hear, Mamma? Frederic Carteret and that girl have quarrelled. Miss Cintra Fraser . . . that's the name right, isn't it?" This was to Charley, who assented.

"Oh ye-es—Miss Cintra Fraser. And Mr. Carteret. Dear me!" The mother showed no interest, and drawled. But then the bullet-headed butler was opening the door, to announce. It was one of the handicaps, Charley found, to a complete enjoyment of his engagement, that there were always guests at Devonshire Place. This evening he had promised himself a really quiet talk with his soul's idol. And here—*teste* the bullet-headed one—were Sir Pantrey and Lady Cookson, Miss Cookson, and Mr. Carver.

"You see what mamma thinks," said the young lady. "But it won't make the slightest difference. I've made up my mind to have that house, and I mean to have it. Besides, the offer's made, and there's an end of it. . . . Oh yes,—you needn't live there unless you like. . . . Marry somebody else, and find a stodgy house in Kensington or Tyburnia—do! I shall be very happy, leading apes at The Cedars." This mockery, which seemed to Charley the most subtle wit, was interrupted by the necessity for greeting the Cookson family, and being introduced to Mr. Carver, with whom that family was about to form an alliance. Miss Cookson was going to put "Mrs. Hawkword Carver" on her cards.

But none of these people concern the story. Destiny had ordained that they should call in due course, and find Mrs. Hinchliffe and her daughter out; that they should ask those ladies to dinner, and find them engaged, though weeping salt tears at the fact; that the weepers should recover their spirits and go through exactly the same operation; until at last both parties acknowledged the powers of Destiny, and each submitted

to the loss of the other. However, the Cooksons and Mr. Carver, and the only other guest—a stray male who always dined out—made up a something which wasn't a party, but which was an obstacle to Mr. Charles Snaith talking with his *fiancée* and her mother till near eleven o'clock, when they departed with benedictions. Charley's happiness at getting rid of them did duty for the remains of the rapture he ought to have experienced at their presence.

He was just congratulating himself on the way in which he had played his part, when Lucy said to him, minimising a palpable yawn:—"What boring people! Oh dear! Now come and tell me about your friend and that girl."

The tone of this specification of Cintra called for a mild protest. "It isn't in any sense Miss Fraser's *fault*," said he. "If either one of them is to blame for it, I should say it was Fred. Yes, certainly Fred, if one must blame somebody. I've told him no man should make a girl an offer unless he feels as sure as . . ."

"As one does oneself? Is that it?" Charley gave a short nod of assent, all he could spare at the moment from his admiration of the speaker. She continued:—"Don't sit on the edge of the sofa and glare round at me through that odious monocle. It makes you screw up your face to a grin, and it isn't becoming." Charley abated the demeanour complained of. "Now tell me about the girl. . . . No—put it away! You can see me just as well without it."

"You do look so awfully jolly in the lampshade light," said the gentleman, humbly. "You've no idea how awfully jolly you look." He suppressed the eyeglass, though.

"Yes I have. I'm not a shepherdess." This disclaimer of Arcadian innocence was suggested by a fascinating little porcelain figure on a console. "Not that they didn't know. That one knows. Little minx! . . . Now about the girl! The girl Cynthia, or whatever her name is." A brisk tap with a paper knife, carved by some unknown Oriental through half a lifetime, recalled Charley from the shepherdess, about whom he seemed to be solving a problem.

"Cintra, not Cynthia," said he, recalled. "Her parents spent their honeymoon at Lisbon, and called her Cintra after Cintra. They thought it such a ripping place."

"People do. Well—she hasn't grown up quite so . . . ripping, if you must use unintelligible English. . . . Don't look so injured. I wasn't going to call her dowdy."

"No-o! I didn't suppose you were."

"Perhaps I've no right to express an opinion. I really hardly spoke to her. I only go by looks. But . . . Cintra! It really is . . ."

"A large order? That's the idea, isn't it?"

"Possibly that's the right expression. I couldn't say. I think perhaps, if I had been asked, I should have advised any English's child's parents not to call it Cintra. Why couldn't they call her Hoxton, or Hackney Wick?"

Charley sought safety in weighing the merits of these two names. "Shouldn't care about Hoxton," said he. "Not for a girl. Hackney Wick's rather another pair of shoes. More flippety-squippety kind of a name! More like Nancy."

The young lady entered into this comparison of names.

"Nancy—Hackney Wick—Nancy!" said she, to see their effect.

"Do we know any Nancy, to try it on?"

"I was thinkin' of her sister Nancy—Cintra's."

"Oh—that's a sister I haven't seen."

"Yes, it is. She sat next to Mrs. Carteret, on her left."

"I only knew she was Miss Fraser, then. But which is the one I've heard you call Elbrouz?"

"Her. Only 'Elbows' is what we call her."

"Oh—Elbows! But why?" Yes, why was that taller girl, whom Lucy had thought quite the more interesting of the two sisters, to be called "Elbows"?

Charley, called to account, lacked decision. "Well—you see—it's a sort of idea! An association! Elbows—the idea of elbows!"

"What is the idea?" It occurred to Miss Lucy—not unnaturally, especially as her own beautiful arms were in evidence, all but an inch or so—that Nature might throw a light on the subject. She endeavoured to get an insight into the idea of elbows by glancing first at one of her own, then at the other, and failed to get round either corner.

"A bony idea," said her lover. "Yours won't wash, and are not in it. Besides, you can't see 'em without a looking-glass. It stands to reason. Now I come to think of it, I can't say exactly *why* we called her Elbows. You would see at once if you knew her. But I'm sorry to say she's had a bad fall."

"I suppose that's consecutive."

"No, it isn't, very. However, she has fallen off her bicycle and was all but killed, I believe. She's at Fred's mother's."

"What's she doing there?"

"They're very thick. She spent Sunday with Mrs. Carteret, and was going home in the dark, on her bike . . ."

"Mamma!" Miss Lucy did not seem keen to know details.

"Ye-es, my dear! Go on."

"I shall not go with you to the Topley Skimmers' tea to-morrow. I shall go over to Mrs. Carteret's, and must have the carriage. I can take a card of yours. You needn't come. I can send the carriage back in time for you. You see,"—she was addressing Charles—"I have never called, and may as well go to-morrow. If Mrs. Carteret is not in, I can come back and go to the Topley Skimmers' with mamma. . . . Yes—you were saying . . ."

"She met a vehicle coming round the corner on the wrong side of the road, and got knocked over, and was considerably damaged. Head. She's still there and may not be fit to move for awhile. Doosid awkward."

"Why?"

"Don't you call it awkward when the sister of a girl your son's engaged to gets smashed, and is brought home to your house—alive you know, not in pieces—and can't be moved—and your son gets his engagement broken off . . ."

"No, certainly not! Why should it make any difference to the families? Besides, they may break it on again."

"Not this time!" said Charles, with comically serious good faith in his case. "It's for good."

"It always is."

"No—they've really made up their minds."

"They always have." Charley evidently shook his head mentally. The young lady seemed to think this topic had had its day, by the way in which she said:—"Anyhow, I shall call to-morrow. If I see neither of them it doesn't matter. . . . Mamma dear, I wish you wouldn't moon." This referred to a certain disposition to sail slowly about the drawing-room on the part of the older lady, with some show of a bias towards tentative rearrangement of ornaments. It was æsthetic, not domestic. If there had been anyone to impress, she might have been open to suspicion of consciousness of an imperial crimson satin; one that Paul Veronese would have gone for. But there was no one but Charley, and his eyes only saw the daughter.

She ignored that young person's disrespectful wish, merely saying:—"I can wait. Only say when you are ready and they can shut up." Lucy replied flippantly:—"Nonsense, Mamma! As if it mattered when Peterfield went to bed, to half a

minute!"—that being the name of the model butler. To Charles, who was wavering under her mother's broad hint, she said imperiously:—"Don't go!! Never mind mamma. I want to talk about that house. Sit down." He obeyed.

The mother awaked from her ~~restless~~ dream, and joined in the conversation. "I was forgetting about that house. Are the people ready to sell it, or not?" She ~~sat~~ moved into an armchair, to hear particulars.

"Well—you see," said Charles, "they only got my letter yesterday morning. Give the poor beggars time to turn round."

"Charles," said the beauty, in a warning voice, "I have a horrible presentiment about that house. We shall lose it."

"I can't see," said her mother, "that it is so very much matters. I suppose that Mr. Carteret and Miss Went-was-her-name have come to an end for good."

"Oh dear yes, Mamma. Either they have or they haven't. It doesn't matter which. What *can* it matter? I want the house anyhow, and I shall be bitterly disappointed if we have lost it. Can't you write to them again, Charles, and say they may have the two thousand pounds?" Charles explained that the only effect of this would be that they would immediately say the two thousand had been a mistake for three. On which Miss Lucy said in a voice of conviction:—"I see how it will be. We shall lose that house."

Her mother said:—"Can't imagine, Lu, what makes you so in love with the place. The neighbourhood's odious; at least, it was *you* said so. I don't know. The house seems to be large enough for two young people beginning. But how on earth you would have split it in half, so as to do for both, quite passes my comprehension."

"Well—we shall lose the house . . ."

When a middle-aged lady, who has evidently been handsome once, albeit a little dried up now, shuts her eyes to talk, she does not mean to be stopped. Mrs. Hinchliffe continued:—"Buy it by all means, if you have made up your minds. Only please let it be understood that I had nothing to do with it. As for losing the house, that's nonsense! It seems to have been empty for fifteen years. And didn't you say there was a public-house next door?"

"Oh dear no!—miles off. But it doesn't matter. I foresee we shall lose that house."

"Nonsense, child! People have had plenty of chances of

taking it 'or fifteen years, and nobody *has* taken it. Nobody will."

"We shall see. When it's too late."

"Why—nobody ever *sees* the house."

"Oh *dear* yes, they do! Hundreds of people! There were people at it when we were there on Saturday. They seemed delighted. *You* saw them." She turned her splendid dark eyes round on her lover.

But his only met them with astonishment. "*I* saw no people," said he.

"Perhaps I shouldn't have said people. People's too many. You saw the old gentleman, though? The others were somewhere else."

"*I* saw no old gentleman. When? Where?"

"Stupid! The old gentleman we passed in the passage. . . . The old gentleman that looked like a rector. . . . The long passage that leads to the greenhouse. *Now* you know." The greenhouse seemed to be the climax of identification, warranting an impatient finger-tap on Charley's coat-sleeve to rouse and accelerate his powers of recollection.

But it was ineffectual. He only looked puzzled, tried hard to recollect, visibly; but was compelled to a slow continuous head-shake of confessed failure. "There were the two old caretaker people," said he, dubiously. He only mentioned them as two collateral facts, not as illuminating the subject. He then went on repeating:—"The old gentleman we passed in the passage—old gentleman we passed in the passage," several times, and ended up with, "No—I don't see my way to any old gentleman. Sorry I can't accommodate you."

"Then all I can say is—how do you expect to get on at the Bar? . . . Well—as a lawyer, then! Bother the bar!—you know what I mean. You certainly are *not* sharp, Charles." The young man seemed rather gratified than otherwise at this castigation; indeed, each word that came from this young lady's beautiful lips seemed more enchanting than the last, no matter how censorious it was. He offered his cheek to the smiter.

But he looked mortally puzzled, too! What on earth was this story of an old gentleman? That he was actual—no dream—was not a subject for doubt. His duty to his idol forbade it. How question any statement she chose to make? Every word was sacred. And as for the possibility of pleasantry, where would the joke be, and what the object of it?

What flashed across his mind most vividly was that it would

never do for Fred to hear that, on the very spot where his uncle was last seen, an accidental divine, who might have been anybody, had been seen by Miss Hinchliffe and invisible to himself. He knew well how prone the human mind is to mystery-mongering, especially at times when mystery is afoot on its own account. Moreover, there had already been some rot about a voice that called out, in that very place! But to ask his divinity to hold her tongue about the incident would exaggerate its importance and fix it in her mind, while in the natural course of things it would be soon forgotten.

Perhaps on the whole it was wisest to say, as he did:—"Rum!", and allow the event to find its own way to Oblivion.

Moreover, he perceived that if he said no more on the subject, he would be under no obligation to dwell upon the fact that this old gentleman, if he were again referred to, had been unseen by him. Indeed, who could say that he might not recollect having seen him, if he could only succeed in forgetting that he had not done so?

CHAPTER XVII

SAID Mrs. Carteret, coming downstairs from a visitor unknown, to the bedroom still in possession of Cintra's sister Nancy:—"It's the good-looking young woman that's going to marry your *bête-noire*—I won't mention his name for fear of enraging you . . ."

"Mr. Uglibus. I know. Fred's friend. She's perfectly divine."

"Well—the question is, shall I bring her in here? She wants to come."

"Bring her in? *Rather*, if she doesn't mind! Only look here. Put her in a good light where I shall see her. I want something to gloat over. . . . Yes—like that!"

Thus it came about that, on the afternoon following, Miss Lucy Hinchliffe floated into the apartment still occupied by Nancy Fraser under protest, as that young lady was convinced that, in theory, she was quite fit to be sent home. Indeed, for that matter, fit to bicycle home, as she had come. But she showed no great physical alacrity towards getting up out of the bed to which—according to her—the scruples of medical ef-feminacy had condemned her.

Now, if Nancy had been duly alive to the share that this young beauty had had in breaking up her sister's engagement—beyond a bare suspicion—she might have been much less disposed for an interview with her. But Cintra had said nothing in her letter, received by Nancy on the previous morning, to that effect. Nor indeed had she given any details, saying merely that she and Frederic had talked the matter well over, and had agreed to part, as the best course, for both; with the retention of an edifying amount of friendship, cultivated as a sort of religious duty. She inaugurated this last by declining to come over to see her sister, as it might involve what under the circumstances could only be considered a *contretemps*. When the friendship had mellowed up to a fine bouquet, it would be time to think about uncorking it. Eric would come over every day, and would bring back word. It may be noted too that Mrs. Carteret had continued in much ignorance of the immediate cause of the disruption. So that Nancy was too in-

definite in her impression that Lucy was responsible for it to feel any reluctance for her society on that account. Indeed, the attributing of any responsibility, other than an unconscious one, to any lady who caused jealousy in another, would have been, according to her view, not playing the game. She resented the vernacular condition of mind which always imputes the most share in any imbroglio to the best-looking woman. So she felt herself in honour bound to acquit any culprit all the more in proportion to her beauty.

A slight concussion of the brain leaves the eyelids very heavy, and those that Nancy raised to see the sight felt that nothing less would keep them open. It was they too that glued her to that pillow. Having been "persuaded" to lie in bed, it was as well to take advantage of it.

"Oh dear, I am so sorry!" said Miss Lucy, effusively. As it was as well to be hanged for a sheep as a lamb, she grasped her nettle, and pretended that she and Nancy were familiar friends. As a matter of fact, they had barely spoken together on that day of the luncheon party. "What a terrible business! But you really are going to be all right again?"

"I've nothing the matter with me. As well as I ever was in my life. I'm only lying here to please the doctor."

"And me, if you please!" said Mrs. Carteret. Then to her visitor:—"It really is only to be on the safe side." Miss Hinchliffe broke into a pæan in praise of precaution, which Mrs. Carteret arrested to say:—"You won't mind my going? That's my son who has just come in, and I particularly want to see him." Miss Hinchliffe's manner combined mortal regret that she and the speaker should ever part, with an almost passionate eagerness to stand out of the way of the door.

She came to an anchor in the chair that had been predestined for her, after exhibiting humility in an attempt to select an inferior one; reasonlessly, as its success would have left the appointed one without the occupant, and a place for a ghost is uncalled for. Conversation then hovered round topics of no immediate interest.

But Miss Hinchliffe had not come to talk about the price of things, the fashions, or the weather; nor even about the advantages or otherwise of a variable gear for bicycles. Her manner dismissed Sturmev-Archer, and she gathered up, as it were, for seriousness, as she said:—"Now I hope, dear Miss Fraser, you'll forgive me for wanting to talk about your dear sister and Mr. Frederic Carteret."

"Couple of geese!" said Nancy, trenchantly.

"Oh, I'm so glad to hear you say that."

"Of course I say that. What would anybody say?"

"It's quite a relief to me. You know it has been the most bitter disappointment to Charles and myself."

"What has?"

"Why, of course!—our delightful castle in the air."

"Which one is that?"

"You laugh at us. But it has really been a serious disappointment to Charles. . . . The one they say was a madhouse out beyond Wimbledon."

"You wanted to halve the house with those two geese?"

"With those two other geese. Yes, I believe Mr. Frederic Carteret had made out complete plans for the division into two parts. Oh dear—it was such a delightful scheme! And now . . ."

"You've lost the house—is that it?"

"Well—not exactly that! Because we are buying the house—I suppose I should say my mother is buying it. I don't profess to understand these things. It's to be our house—I know that. What we are both lamenting over is the collapse of the delightful arrangement of the housekeeping, or being next-door neighbours at any rate. Charles was looking forward so to having his friend so near. But of course from the point of view of their being only a couple of geese . . . Oh, my dear Miss Fraser, how grateful I am to you for the expression!"

"You're very welcome. Only mind you!—I've only had one letter from Cintra about it. It isn't as if we had talked it over. I may be mistaken."

"But you *do* think it may be all a false alarm, and they may make it up again."

Nancy laughed aloud at the speaker's scared tone. "Rather," said she, slangily, "I should say it was ten to one they would. I've written to Cit to blow her up. But I shall be fit to ride back to-morrow—see if I'm not! And I mean to pitch it hot and strong into the young woman. She's the sort that wants a little decision. And really, if I'm right about the cause of this shindy, she is the biggest goose."

"I suppose I mustn't ask what it was—the cause?"

To the frank integrity of Miss Nancy's nature this speech was all-powerful to scatter what remained of her suspicions of her visitor, and was almost proof positive that that young lady was honestly unconscious of her own complicity. How could

those beautiful dark eyes that gazed into hers so anxiously and candidly be the eyes of a mischief-making minx? That was the form her question would have taken, had it reached language. Nancy wavered on the edge of an unreserved confidence—a full disclosure of her suspicions. But prudence prevailed. For if she replied:—"Of course it was *you*—the cause," on what lines could the joint housekeeping at The Cedars ever be conducted? Such a mutual consciousness between the two mistresses would surely damn the whole arrangement, were the breach between the separated lovers to be healed over with never a scar. A hurried review of these considerations made her answer:—"I think I would rather not tell you, if you don't mind."

"Why, of course! As if I had a right to pry into your sister's affairs!" Nancy immediately felt as if she had given a rude rebuff, and must make some *amende honorable*. The beauty proceeded:—"You see, I really am a perfect stranger if you come to think of it." She really was, but the perfect candour of her disavowal of intimacy sent strangership flying. Nancy felt that she was not a stranger because she said she was.

Here was the opportunity for the *amende*. "We may be strangers," said she, "but if Cit comes to her senses, shan't we be a sort of wishy-washy sisters-in-law? . . . Well, no—not quite, I admit. But that kind of thing. Because Fred Carteret and Mr. Snaith are as good as brothers, aren't they?"

"Better than some brothers. Charles is simply heartbroken about this miscarriage. You'll quite understand me, dear Miss Fraser, if I say that it is on *his* account that I feel it so strongly. I don't mean that I shall not be *dreadfully sorry* to lose your sister. . . . Because—because . . ." It was rather difficult to round up this sentence out of the materials at her disposal; so the speaker clasped her hands in a sort of mild frenzy, exclaiming:—"Oh dear!—*you* know the sort of thing I mean."

Nancy didn't, but it didn't matter. She said she did. Those eyes, that she could not take her own off, were at work upon her, and she certainly was not going to refuse to accommodate their owner with such a very small compliance. She was quite ready to pretend that this young lady had become somehow embosomed in her family; that she had a perfect right to be desolated at any miscarriage of its affairs. But she reflected on the oddity of the position. Was she sure that this solicitude from a stranger would be welcomed by all its members? A dream of Cintra crossed her mind, thanking this Miss What's-

her-name to keep her condolences to herself till they were asked for.

But Cintra would not come near Maida Vale, for fear of meeting Fred; so Nancy might pretend to her heart's content. Besides, how could she anticipate Cintra's resentment against any Miss What's-her-name's impertinence, when she herself was impertinently wondering all the while how the Miss What's-her-name could endure to have Mr. Snaith ki . . . But her mind flinched from completion of the verb, and was even in doubt whether she ought to think of the gentleman as "Mr. Nosey," which was the designation it had employed.

Did you ever feel that bosom-friendship was overtaking you apace; for someone of your own sex, of course? Ten to one you have, if yours is the female one. Nancy felt it coming on, and resigned herself to its influence, especially when the Miss What's-her-name, quite off her own bat, brought her chair a little nearer. But she was laying down conditions all the while, Nancy was; one, for instance, that she should get at the mystery of her visitor's *entichement* for Mr. Nosey.

Not that she supposed that she should get so far as that during this interview, or perhaps the next one. She would have to be content, for the present, with the merest surface chat. Was not Mr. Snaith a very clever lawyer? That seemed to her a good way of getting her visitor to talk about this gentleman, in whom the questioner felt absolutely no interest, except to discover how so uninteresting a person could have engaged the affections of one so fascinating, so superior to himself in every way.

"Charles Snaith may be very clever," said she, shrugging her perfect shoulders and laughing, more tolerantly than respectfully. "I daresay he is. But he keeps it for business hours. I can't say I ever saw it in society. But he's very good and upright and all that sort of thing."

Nancy fairly stared with astonishment. "Well!" said she, "I *couldn't* marry a man because he was good. Or upright. I should require him to be handsome at least, even if he wasn't clever."

Miss Hinchliffe was stretching the fingers of a lemon-coloured kid glove round her beautiful right hand, and seemed to defer her reply to get an accurate measurement. Then she said, with a sigh:—"How true that is! Charles is *not* handsome. . . . Oh no, dear Miss Fraser, I know you didn't *say* so. You are much too kind-hearted." She took the beautiful eyes off the

glove problem to say:—"But you did mean it. Now, didn't you?"

The circumstances called for a good round fib. But fibs were not Nancy's line. She considered a moment—a pause for consideration being her only tribute to mendacity—and then said:—"Well—I *did*! And it's no use saying I didn't. But I didn't say I was a beauty myself. We're both in the same boat, he and I. Fellow-townpeople—that sort of thing!"

"I should like to live in that town. It would be very interesting. But do poor Mr. Snaith justice. *He* never said he was a beauty."

"Did he say I was? Come now!"

It was Miss Lucy's turn to feel that concealment was useless. Said she, evasively:—"I don't think I ever heard him talk about . . . about looks."

"Did, you, ever, hear him—say I was a beauty? *That's* the point!"

Miss Hinchliffe made a *moue* and raised her eyebrows slightly. "We-ell!" said she. "I don't suppose I ever did. So it's no use saying so. Is it?"

"Now, do tell me the sacred solemn truth! Did you ever hear him call me by a nickname?"

Miss Hinchliffe looked as if she felt that the conversation was rather absurd. "What nickname?" she asked.

"Oh, very well then!—he calls me several. I have no doubt of it. He and Fred Carteret! I'm not in a rage with them, you know."

"No—I see you are laughing. But do tell me which nickname it was. How can I tell that any two of Charles's nicknames belong to the same person?"

"Is it possible that? . . . Don't make me really laugh, because of my head! . . . Is it possible that you never heard the expression 'Elbows' applied to—to this connection?"

"If I'm to tell the truth . . . All right!—I'm going to. . . . If I'm to tell the truth, I *have* heard that expression, and I thought it was Elbrouz, because of your sister being Cintra."

"Elbrouz is a town in Persia, isn't it? Or Mesopotamia? It doesn't matter which, as I wasn't called after it. *Cit* was called after Cintra. It's in Portugal. And Portugal is a little outlandish, but still *possible*. Mesopotamia is out of all reason."

"Charles explained that it was Elbows, not Elbrouz. But

he couldn't assign any reason for its use—any reasonable reason. . . . You were feeling to see? For Nancy's hands had vanished up the two sleeves of her kimono.

"Yes," said she. "Feeling for something distinctive or characteristic. But they seem normal. By-the-bye, I never thought of it before—never thought of *them*, in fact! How awfully out of it the poor things must feel! No one ever takes the slightest notice of them. And they can't talk to one another about it, by nature." Nancy seemed to think that this required revision. For she added, a moment later:—"Unless one pulls them together behind one's back, like Calisthenics. Perhaps one ought to, to give them a chance."

"Do you know, Charles said if I knew you, I should see at once *why* they called you Elbows. I must say I think his legal acumen is at fault, for once."

"I'm no judge, as a party concerned. But I must say I do think that anyone who saw him would see at once why we call him . . . But—oh dear!—I suppose I oughtn't to have said that!"

"Oh—but do, *please*! I would give anything to know what you call him."

"I *can't*. It's too . . . excessive. It's really bad taste. Only, you know, of course it has all been in the strictest confidence."

"So was Elbows. He never knew when he told me that I should go away and tell you. Besides, if you don't tell me now, I shall believe it was worse than it really was. Consider!"

"Well—there is that!" Nancy considered.

"Yes—there is that."

"And you are quite certain not to tell him. However, you *couldn't* tell him. Of course not. Only it is to be the silent tomb—that's understood?"

"Of course!—the silent tomb."

"Well—Nosey, then! There! . . . Oh, dear, what a wiggling I should get from Cintra if she knew I had told that!"

Why is the story at pains to record such absolutely trivial chat? Simply because of the bearing its very triviality has on the character of its perpetrators. The story hopes too, if a story can be said to hope, that some of the most trivial passages of this conversation will remain in its reader's memory.

As for Miss Hinchliffe, she was ready to acquiesce in any topic that came to hand, provided that close attention to details was not called for. For although her visit to Nancy had been at

her own express wish—merely to consolidate, as it were, her foothold in the house—she was keeping an eye, or rather an ear, the whole time, on the man's voice on the upper floor. She could not do what would have pleased her best, and hark back on this visit to Nancy, and exchange the girl's society—for that was all she was; interesting and original perhaps, but a mere girl for all that—for that of her *fiancé's* good-looking friend upstairs. It was unfortunate that she came away from Mrs. Carteret so soon. Another three minutes and Fred would have crossed her on the stairs.

But Fat's last word on this visit was not spoken. A sound of winding-up was felt more than heard from the upper region, and it was obvious that the male voice implied its owner's departure. What more natural, exits being on the tapis, than that Miss Hinchliffe should look at her watch, and become panic-stricken at the lateness of the hour? Go she *must*—that was clear! As to the exact time and manner of her going, it justified the conversation between Nancy and her hostess which followed it almost immediately.

The latter came into the room after her son had departed, the young lady having gone hurriedly away just before in order—so she said—not to get mixed up with him in the passage, a thing she hated. She liked, she said, that the drama of human life should be enacted like a French play, with a well-defined group to every scene. "Well, Nancy dear," said Mrs. Carteret. "How did you get on with your visitor?"

"She is simply lovely," said Nancy, considering that an emphatic reply on her main point—beauty, to wit—would answer for everyone else's.

"Her looks are all very well. But how does she impress you? She *does* impress you, doesn't she?"

"I suppose she does, somewhere. Only it doesn't mark. Comes off! It's always like that, with me, when looks come in. They might be Judas Iscariot—the parties might. But I should never know it." There was obduracy for its own sake in this attitude of Nancy's.

Mrs. Carteret may have felt this. She said, gravely:—"Would you trust her?"

"Oh dear yes—I'm sure I should! Look at her eyes!"

"But I mean—would you feel safe?"

"I don't know about that. Couldn't say. But as a matter of fact, I should *trust* her, safe or no, down to the ground."

"I hope it would . . ."

"Pay?"

"I hope you wouldn't be disappointed."

"I should expect not to be—so it wouldn't matter. But what makes you so down upon her?"

"I may be all wrong, you know. One is, very often. But I think your sister *may* be right. I don't mean in quarrelling with Fred about it—because it is quarrelling, whatever they may say . . ."

"Oh, *they'll* make it up all right! You see if they don't. But go on. I interrupted you."

"I was going to say that when Cintra got so angry with her on the way home, that day you met her here—you told me, you know . . ."

"Oh dear yes! Cit was in a towering passion."

"Well—she may have had provocation."

"Oh!" said Nancy, abruptly. She said it in the way in which one *doesn't* welcome a new thought. She seemed to dwell on it uneasily for a moment before she continued:—"I'm not very sharp at this sort of thing. You think . . . what?"

"I think—after that lunch—if I had been in your sister's place, I should not have liked the idea of a joint household."

"I see. Perhaps you're right. But nothing struck me at the time. Everything seemed quite square. Then I'm a bad judge of this sort of fun. I'm not in it."

"I have just been getting Fred to tell me more. This about their having found out their mistake and so forth is all nonsense. What your brother called the *scrum* was a good round quarrel over the house scheme. Please understand—I take your sister's part!"

"I don't."

"Well—you're her sister. Of course that makes a difference. But do try and think of it this way—to oblige me. Try and think how you would feel if you were in this sort—it's your own expression!—in this sort of fun. Imagine yourself pledged to become the wife of a man whom you credit with an undivided affection for yourself . . ."

"Thing's impossible! But never mind!—cut along!"

". . . And imagine yourself suddenly convinced that he is susceptible—suppose we say—to someone else." Mrs. Carteret paused, for her hearer to assimilate ideas.

Nancy accepted the pause, and came to a decision at the end of it. "I should chuck him," said she.

"Then you would act on less provocation than your sister's."

"I don't understand."

"Cintra has not *chucked* him . . . Really you are the most slangy young monkey! . . ."

"I get slangy from having to stop in bed. Go on! . . . 'has not chucked him' . . ."

". . . Because she thought he admired another girl. It was more than that. If every girl acted as drastically as I understand you would . . . Well—how many engagements would last a fortnight?"

"Precious few, I daresay. But what do you mean by 'more than that'?"

"I think it's pretty clear. Cintra's provocation was that she was asked to live in the other young woman's pocket—as the phrase is."

Nancy raised the still heavy eyelids that had been resting after an unusual effort, and looked at her friend in a wondering, puzzled way. "But they would be *married—both* of them!" said she. "That would be all settled and done with." Mrs. Carteret bit the smile she could scarcely resist, to check it, with indifferent success. "Why are you laughing at me?" said Nancy.

"Was I? Well—perhaps I was! You are so very unlike . . . most girls. Most girls out of their teens, I mean. You are so very . . ." She stopped.

"Why not say *innocent* at once and have done with it?"

"Because it's rather an offensive expression, on the whole."

"I'll promise not to be violent if you call me it."

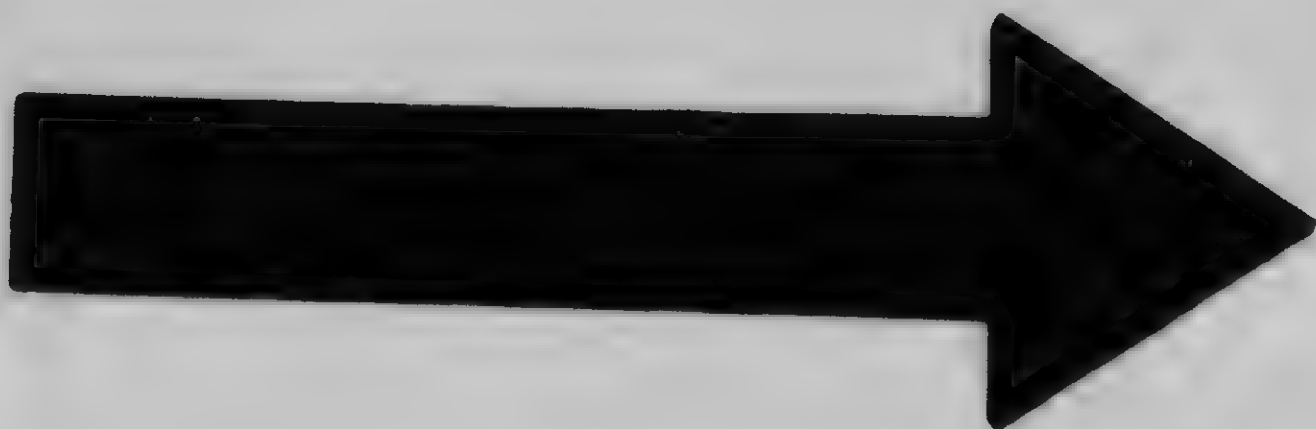
"I don't think I meant exactly *innocent*. Perhaps I should say *unworldly*."

"There's not much difference in the offensiveness."

"I don't know that I need say either. What I meant was, that you seem to have lived among very . . . very *well-balanced* people."

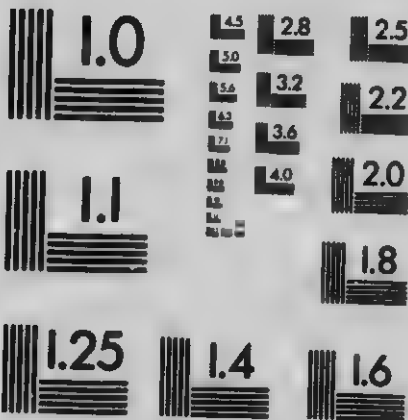
Nancy was weighing some consideration in the background of her mind. "I was thinking," said she, "which of the people down our road are well-balanced. Fancy they nearly all are! There's the theatrical lot at forty-seven certainly—they might bear a little balancing. But all the rest that I know anything about are respectability itself. They snap at each other all day long, and go to church regularly."

"I think I follow the connection of your ideas," said Mrs. Carteret. Her amusement at her young friend's way of ex-



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pressing herself did not seem to prevent her understanding its dominant *motif*. "I remember when I was young I used to think of married persons very much as you do. Only, they were always elderly and had large families. Do you suppose that all the wives and husbands who figure in divorce cases are like that—like the well-balanced people in your suburb?"

"Stodgy and respectable? Oh dear no!—there's the other sort. But then they are dissolute."

"Don't you think that perhaps you *classify* people with rather too much severity?"

"Perhaps I do. But what I meant just now, when I said that if they married they would be settled and done with, was that then they would know where they were."

"And do you think that if Cintra married Fred after suspecting that—mind, I only say suspecting—that he had shown a susceptibility to another young lady, she would be able to live in serene security in the same house? I think not. I don't think matrimony is exactly a panacea against all the vagaries of human nature. Remember that the scrum, or shindy, turned entirely on the residence of the two couples in this queer old house. No—on the whole I cannot be surprised at your sister's attitude. I should have said exactly the same myself, in her position."

"Doesn't a good deal turn on the other party? The other young woman?"

"Almost everything." Mrs. Carteret spoke very gravely, and seemed to await Nancy's comment with a good deal of interest.

"Well—*then*—in this case . . ." Nancy stopped short.

"In this case—what?"

The girl raised herself from the pillow that still had such attractions for the contused head that had completely recovered, and reclined on one of the condemned elbows. "Oh, dearest Mrs. Carteret," said she, "you never can imagine . . ." She stopped again, with an excited, distressed look on her face.

"I'm very sorry, but—I can."

"Oh, but it is impossible—*impossible*! You should have heard her—only just now—how she spoke."

"What did she say?"

"Promise not to disbelieve her on purpose!"

"I shall be only too glad to think I am mistaken."

Nancy lay down again to recollect, not without satisfaction. "I said they were a couple of geese," said she, "and that they

would make it up again and it was sure to be all right. And she was so glad . . ."

"Because of the house?"

"Oh dear no!—simply at the prospect of their coming to live there. The failure of the housekeeping plan doesn't put an end to the house. Indeed, I understood her to say that her mother had bought the house."

"What else did she say?"

"She said what a terrible disappointment it had been to Charles and herself when they heard the engagement was broken off. Particularly Charles, because he had looked forward so to having his friend so near him. And now it would be all right, and how grateful she was to me for calling them a couple of geese. Then she supposed she mustn't ask what was the cause of the row, and I could see by her manner that she was ignorance itself. Anybody could."

"Could they? What did you say?"

"Said certainly not. Because think what a smasher it would have been to the house plan—any chance that was left of it—if she had had an inkling . . ."

"What a smasher!" Mrs. Carteret acquiesced somewhat drily. "What did she say to that?"

"Said of course, what right had she to pry into my sister's affairs? And then we got off the line, and said shouldn't we be a sort of half-cooked sisters-in-law if it came off after all—the wedding? But it was no go, because though your Fred and her young man are thicker than thieves, they are not exactly brothers."

"Not exactly brothers. And then you let it alone?"

"Very nearly. She got rather mixed over saying how sorry she would be to lose Cintra. Because, don't you see, she and Cintra scarcely know each other from Adam."

"They might get as far as that. Anything else? I mean, was that all the conversation?"

"No—yes—no! I wanted to ask her—only I didn't—how she could stand . . . Well!—how she could stand a loverlike attitude on the part of Nosey."

"Nosey being Mr. Snaith?"

"Precisely. Let me see—then she got it out of me that I knew that he and Fred called me Elbows, and I admitted that at home we called him Nosey. Then she looked at her watch, and went. Said she should walk to the railway station."

"When was that? How long before we came down?"

"Very little time. No time."

"I heard the street door just as we came into the passage. Was that her?"

"I expect so. I heard you and your son a moment later."

"Oh." Mrs. Carteret's audible concern did not go beyond a monosyllable, but in her heart she was hoping that Miss Hinchliffe caught her train. Also that Fred didn't

Fate favoured neither wish,—or both, according to the views we take of trains on the District Railway. Can one catch or lose one's train, when—catch it or miss it!—there is always another in ten minutes? Which is one's train? The one you ride in, says Destiny. The one you find in *me*, says Bradshaw. Each speaks with the voice of mere Officialism. And, when the intervals are so short and the trains so many, even the subtlest of station masters cannot tell you whether the one that is coming is this one, or the last one, or the next one.

Fred's visit to his mother this afternoon belonged to a class of visit that he had invented as an exponent of filial duty, to serve its turn until Nancy should take her departure from Maida Vale. He minimised his chances of being brought into contact with that young woman—a contingency he shrank from—by being unable, owing to an important appointment in town, to get over to lunch; and compelled, by an old promise to dine with a friend, to go away early. But it was not in him to let forty-eight hours pass without seeing his mother, and indeed seldom did so even in ordinary times. At this period it was a consolation to him that the very obstacle which barred his free ingress and egress supplied his mother with a society that appeared to compensate her for the loss of his own. So he chose his times for visits as suited him best, merely avoiding risks of coming across Miss Nancy.

Of course he was not afraid of being pitchforked into her apartment, *à contre cœur*. But he never knew, when he fished for his latchkey outside the street door, that he should not meet her in the passage, reinstated and ready for the bicycle; even for its pump, if called on.

There was nobody in the street when Fred went out at the garden gate, this time. That is to say, God-knows-who was walking to and fro as usual, or riding, as might be; but the young lady whose exit had preceded him—as he judged by a door-slam, ascribed to her by his mother—was not visible. He had then been accurate in his calculation of what time would be

needed for a clear offing before he left port. He had had a sub-wish to be inaccurate. But it had not been sufficiently marked to forbid his being glad the contrary was the case. He was therefore at liberty not to be sorry that this antecedent young lady was well on her way to St. John's Wood Road station before he left the house. Perhaps she wasn't going there. That would leave him free to walk as quick as he liked. He walked as quick as he liked.

He reached the station without seeing anybody, and felt, officially, glad. He would have felt officially sorry if he had chanced upon Lucy Hinchliffe going the same way as himself. He had considered it his duty to decide that it would be embarrassing to meet her just at present. But she would have had her usual effect upon him, for all that.

Perhaps the story is rash, with its limited powers of description, in trying to describe such a curious and contradictory mixture of impulses as Fred's at this moment. But what can a poor story do, with so queer a contrivance as the human soul to deal with? If only that mystery would always be clear and intelligible, how much easier its chronicle would be to write!

Fred's preoccupations prevented his noticing that the price of his ticket was greater than usual. It dawned on him later, after it had been perforated past recall. Not that he would have taken the trouble to change a first-class ticket taken by mistake. But it made him resolve that he would have his money's worth out of the company; and it was probably his looking for a first-class carriage, and not seeing one, that prevented his jumping into the train that was just leaving the station when he reached the platform. "Another in ten minutes!" said the *genius loci*, to console him.

He did not the least know whether it was relief or disappointment that he felt at not having overtaken Lucy Hinchliffe. He suspected himself now of having really schemed to that end, that looked like disappointment. But he received the idea very easily that she had taken a cab home, or gone another way altogether; that looked like relief. Anyhow, she had vanished from his immediate possibilities.

He walked about the platform thinking—thinking. Not about Cintra; she had also vanished. He was sometimes surprised at himself that it should be so, that he should not feel more chagrin at his position. But whenever memories of the earlier days of his engagement crossed his mind, with their inevitable suggestion of a *tempo felice*, it took refuge in the reflec-

tion that that happy time had not been without its drawbacks; and that, with it, they had disappeared. At least he had got his release from the anticipation of that extremely British family at Gipsy Hill; that, but for this *dénouement*, would have been his for good and all. He found that the one epoch he really regretted was that of the first intoxication of reciprocated love, gradually settling down to a chronic condition of desire to insulate its object from her surroundings, and have her all to himself. That end would have been attained—but! There were so many buts. Had she been prepared to give her family up? Had he been prepared to marry it? He replied to both questions in the negative, with a super-emphasis to the latter when he thought of that stepmother.

So he found it easy to think of Cintra as little as possible, but he took care to do it because that course was wise and showed fortitude. Do not let it be supposed that the story is laughing at Fred for his precautions against himself. They were merely the form conscientiousness took in a mind somewhat over-prone to self-examination.

It was active also when he found that for forty-eight hours he had scarcely given a thought to what was after all of more importance than the failure of one trothplight—namely, the unsolved problem of his uncle's disappearance. Was this owing to a growing acquiescence in what was inevitable? And had it grown to seem more inevitable since Flinders's Mill the other night? Had the fact that Flinders's mill-pool yielded when dredged a resuscitable corpse familiarised his mind with ideas of other mill-ponds concealing life extinct? It seemed not impossible.

A dreadful idea that had disquieted him more than once came back on the heels of this thought. If, long after every search had proved a forlorn hope, and everyone had been convinced that his non-return meant death, the missing man should suddenly turn up—would he be welcomed? Not necessarily. . . . Well—of course he would, in a sense! But might he not see, behind the curtain of a glad surprise as far as the thought in some minds:—"Must we hark back through all those obsequies and windings-up we hated, and be prepared to take up life at the sundering of our ways, and perchance after all be prepared to have the same thing over again, a day's march ahead or so?" He was trying to picture to himself a reappearance of the old familiar figure of his uncle, after he and all about him had long thought of him as dead—for that time must come one day, how-

ever much one shrank from acknowledging it—and wondering what would he feel himself in such a case, when the sound of his train in the tunnel stopped his imaginings, and revived his interest in his receipt of full value for that ticket.

The porter on the platform seemed as interested as himself. "First-class forward," said he, spontaneously, as Fred looked up and down the thirds, which were very empty, and really acceptable enough for a journey from station to station. But the ticket held Fred spellbound. To be even with the company he actually ran along the platform. The guard shouted to him to get in there—look alive! He looked alive, and found himself in a carriage with one other occupant.

When one is starting on a journey and there is loads of time—this phrase is familiar to the lax of speech—one examines the persons already in the carriage as though it was to be matrimony, if ladies; and a fight, if males. They in return glare upon you with an unspeakable bitterness; but, if you show resolution, relent, and admit that that is really an empty seat. On the other hand, when you join the train in a hurry, you postpone assessment of your companions, at least until you know which side up you are, which sometimes you don't.

Fred didn't look at the other occupant at all till after he had looked at his watch. When he did so, he thought his wits had surely forsaken him. Otherwise, he was face to face with the Impossible, with a full knowledge of how seldom it comes to pass.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE Impossible in this case was not perhaps what is generally understood by those who will have it that everything is possible so long as one can tell the truth about it without one's words contradicting themselves. There is no contradiction in terms in saying that one can be in any two places within a quarter of an hour; but to say that this is possible, at one and the same instant, is to call in question the meaning of the verb *be*. A man could be in Melbourne and London within that period if his ship went quick enough, but no ship could go quick enough for him to be in both towns at once. It would take all the edge off his unity, and compromise his entity past reinstatement. You may not agree; and the Logician may not agree; but that is the story's view. It will leave you and the Logician to settle the point, and get on with itself. Perhaps if it says that the Physically Impossible was what seemed to Fred to have gone and come to pass, all parties will be satisfied.

If it uses words that length, surely much fallacy may be forgiven it. Its position is that of the Magdalen, with some details varied.

Anyhow, there in the diagonally opposite corner of that first-class carriage, in defiance of everything conceivable from the data at his command, sat a young lady, who—if such a thing had not been physically impossible—would certainly have been Lucy Hinchliffe. But it *was* Lucy Hinchliffe, beyond a shadow of doubt. Her eyes could be no one else's. Moreover, they were luminous with greeting to Fred, and her smile was luminous too. Some kind of impossibility had happened. Never mind that!—its results were too good to cavil at.

"But I thought you were at my mother's," said Fred, as soon as surprise permitted speech. For not only was he face to face with the Impossible, but a well-defined electric shock had passed up his arm. Evidently lemon-coloured kid gloves were conductors of electricity.

"So I was. Why not?" Simple English monosyllables surely! But spoken in such a voice, they might have been Italian, or Romaic, or the language in which nightingales say

the same thing to each other all night about the stars in June.

"Why? Because you've come the wrong way."

"Have I? Why? That's like Alice In The Looking-Glass, when the guard said she was going the wrong way. But then, that was in the looking-glass."

"So it was. Of course! Don't think I ever noticed it! But how did you manage it, coming from my mother's. . . . Oh, I think I see. You walked to the other station—Marlborough Road?"

"No—guess again!"

"Give it up!"

"Well—it's very simple. I got on the wrong platform, and got in the wrong train before I knew where I was. I got out and crossed to the other side at Swiss Cottage—because it took two stations to convince me—and was just in time to catch this train. I'm so glad."

How glad Fred would have been that she was glad—if only . . . ! But the reservation was absolutely prohibitive. It made him shudder, almost, to think of his friend's unconsciousness of this. . . . Of this *what*? What was it his friend was to remain unconscious of? Never mind!

But the young lady's gladness was a formulated and permissible one. She had wanted so much to get half an hour's chat with Mr. Carteret; therefore she rejoiced that she was in this train, not the next. Her exclamation had been opportunist, not personal. Fred felt relief, as well as chagrin, at this. He denied the latter, and made a merit of the former. He was bound in honour to Charley to be relieved at the dissipation of any suspicion that his friend's Lucy could derive satisfaction from any society but his. He was merely discharging a duty.

But—*oh dear!*—it was impossible to talk in this tunnel. We must wait till we get out at Baker Street. Here *was* Baker Street. Now we could hear ourself speak.

Fred made a practical suggestion. He had intended to go to King's Cross—as witness his ticket—and to cab therefrom to the Temple. But he could just as easily cab from here. He stuttered a little over suggesting that Devonshire Place—where he had been to dinner, you remember?—was on the way, and . . . But perhaps Miss Hinchliffe wouldn't like a hansom . . . ?

On the contrary, Miss Hinchliffe was wedded to hansoms. Had she her choice, she would pass her life in hansoms. But they had a fault—they were too quick. She wanted to talk to

Mr. Carteret quietly; not to be hurried. Therefore, let them walk at their leisure to Devonshire Place. Then if Mr. Carteret could not be persuaded to come in, the butler would call a cab for him in a moment. He could only lose a very few minutes.

"You know what I want to speak to you about?" said the young lady, timidly, as they left the station.

"I can guess. Please, dear Miss Hinchliffe, don't stand on ceremony. Talk to me as plainly as you like about—my engagement to Miss Fraser. It is at an end, as you know. . . . That is what you were referring to, isn't it?"

"What else could it be?"

"Nothing at all. But there is nothing to be said. It is over and done with."

"Is it quite—quite certain? Is there *no* chance?"

"Absolutely none whatever. Neither on my side nor hers. I see that is what you were thinking."

She did not contradict him, but said only:—"You are not angry with Miss Fraser?"

"Angry with *her*? Why should I be? I am angry with myself, I grant you. But not with Cintra."

"There is a thing I cannot understand. . . . But you will think me so odd!"

"I don't think I shall. I may think you more frank and honest than other women, but not . . . However, perhaps that is odd."

"Odd to be frank and honest? Then I should like to be odd. But let me tell you . . ."

"Go on."

"What I mean that I cannot understand. When two persons—a man and a girl, you know—once speak to one another of affection . . . of love . . ." Her colour heightened perceptibly in the evening light, as she paused in her walk for a moment and turned her destructive eyes upon her companion.

"You mean that you cannot understand how either of them can ever shy off?"

"Ye-es. I think that is what I mean. Only you put it more—more incisively—than I should have done. How *can* they?"

"They do, every day. Isn't it better that they should, when they find out what we have found out? Cintra and myself, I mean." He too was flushed, and candid.

"What is that? What have you found out?"

"Our mistake. It was a mistake all along. It was a mistake

which might easily have ended in unhappiness for both, and I shall always be thankful for the accident which—which opened our eyes.” Something seemed to come in the way of the natural continuance of this speech. His immediate silence did not seem a reasonable sequel.

She was watching him too closely to overlook it. “You are not going to tell me what it was?”—she half asked, after a moment’s waiting. Then in response to an embarrassed reluctance on his part:—“No!—no! I am not asking to be told what it was. I have no right to know. . . . No—stop—you mustn’t tell me! I have no right to know.” Whereupon Fred, who was indeed at some loss to think what he could ascribe the collapse of his engagement to, speaking as he did to the unconscious cause of it, was glad to renounce further explanation. So he said, somewhat weakly:—“Well, perhaps you’re right,” and surrendered the point.

Very likely you—you who read this—have noticed how slowly conversation develops between companions who walk together in a crowded street. The foregoing fragment of chat, which would scarcely have filled out three minutes of stage-time—if spoken trippingly on the tongue—had lasted these two from Baker Street to Devonshire Place: and, so far, the young lady had rather elicited conversation from the gentleman than contributed to its substance herself. It seemed natural that she should exclaim at this point:—“Oh dear!—here we are close at home, and I haven’t said what I wanted to say.” Fred felt that this could be remedied by finishing the interview indoors, but he preferred what Miss Hinchliffe suggested, that they should walk on a short distance to accommodate matters.

He kept silence for a hundred yards, waiting for her to use the opportunity, and then said, lubricatively, “Yes—you were going to . . .,” and stopped.

“To try and make you change your mind—somehow! But I don’t know what to say, that’s the truth. And it wouldn’t be of any use. . . . Now, would it?”

A sort of delirium clouded Fred’s mind. It forcibly presented to him, as something on no account to be spoken, an epitome of his position. What he had to keep his tongue from saying was:—“This, and this only, is what I cannot do at your bidding. Set me to any other task and I will do it,—oh, how willingly! But wed another woman! Not I! I can and will choke back this growing turmoil of passion, for I hold my friendship sacred for your husband that is to be, but the girl who had sole keeping

of my heart until I saw you has become a mere shadow in my memory."

He struggled hard to speak in a matter-of-fact, matter-of-course, everyday, commonplace way—and failed. Of course he failed. It is a thing no man has ever yet done on purpose. He answered her "Now would it?" with "Not very much, certainly!" The words were well chosen, the manner in fault. He was looking away from her as she glanced shrewdly at him. He ought to have met her eyes. He was adding a supplementary half-cough behind his hand, needlessly. He ought to have been content to leave his words ungarnished.

Her observation of his manner apparently encouraged her to say:—"I suppose it would be of no use for me to call on her and . . . and represent to her . . ."

The idea of such an interview scared Fred. He could not trust Heaven to avert it in response to the unexpressed prayer of a private individual. He must take action to stop it. "My dear Miss Hinchliffe," said he, "if you were to carry a petition from me to Miss Fraser to reconsider her decision for both our sakes . . ." He stumbled and hesitated. Was he not managing to say the exact opposite of what he wished?

Probably. Because she brightened and said:—"Oh, do let me! That is what I really *should* enjoy doing."

Fred hastened to correct the false impression. That he must do at any cost. "Excuse me—I was going on," said he. "I was going to say that I have no doubt you would be as likely to influence her as myself. But—to put it plainly—I cannot send *that* petition."

"Oh, how you *have* disappointed me!" said Miss Hinchliffe.

"I am so very sorry. But what would you have? Now that we have parted, by complete consent—for we are unanimous—should I be consulting her interest, or my own, in trying to renew relations which we both regard as completely at an end?"

Now, the story has a conviction that had this young lady really had an honest wish to relight the extinct fires of love for his former idol on this young man's altar of sacrifice, she would have availed herself of old materials for doing so. She would have dwelt entirely on the cruel position of the deserted damsel, would have pooh-poohed the idea that she could have been in earnest in her renunciation of her lover; would have "pointed out" the share that pride and dignity—both false, perhaps—might have had in influencing her action. She would have made insidious suggestions based on the well-known fact that the least

suspicion of partiality on the part of her for him, or him for her, will ignite a spark of counter-partiality in each, t'other way round. But a brace of jealousies will play the same game backwards, and either will hark back and become love again that suspects its fellow of being love in disguise. Manipulation of this fact was possible.

Miss Lucy might also quite easily have "pointed out" that it would be doing greater justice to his own noble nature to consult Cintra's interests more than his own, and to credit her with a sorrow at heart for the success of her hasty actions. Instead of that she appeared to ascribe to her a stony indifference, which however would probably yield to renewed efforts on Fred's part, which she exhorted him to make on his own behalf. Was she aware, or not, that the young man's soul had begun to discover that Cintra was not an absolute necessity to it? The story, keeping in view some remarks she made about Cintra after their introduction, inclines to the belief that she was. She was quite safe in exhorting him to try again, at any rate; and to do so was to maintain the purity of her altruism. But she didn't want Cintra in her house, or next door. Did she want Fred?

Her exhortations to him to reinstate himself with Cintra lasted round two sides of Regent's Park Square. Fred was basking all that while in the sun of a dangerous happiness, with a painful consciousness always that his enjoyment of the warmth of its rays was almost criminal. Men who have been saved from the jaws of a lion have told of a strange anæsthesia that enwraps them, in the very throes of a terrible death; how they have looked this death in the face and felt no fear. Fred knew that his growing passion for this girl meant to show him no mercy, even as that lion meant none to his victim. It would devour him—but what of that? The seductive moment was irresistible, and he made no stand against its enchantment. And all the while he was clinging to his belief in her utter unconsciousness of his feelings, as a safeguard—his only safeguard—against himself. If that unconsciousness were flawed in the least, even though the complete indifference to himself that he imputed to her were maintained intact, would it not undermine and destroy his relations with his friend? He fairly winced at the hint of some passing imp that she too might . . . But *no!*—rather a breach of the canon against self-slaughter than *that!* A traitor to his old friend—never!

He did not care very much what she was talking about. His interest in Cintra had fallen to zero by now. She was a thing

of the past; a mistake he had made once, whom it was an easy duty to forget. This girl was a reality. Or rather, she was reality itself. Everything was a mist, beyond the two eyes that flashed their earnestness—real or assumed—upon him in the blaze of that May sunset, and the lips that spoke with a voice that made the roar of the London streets a meaningless murmur, a stupid continuity he might be alive to again, or not, when that voice ceased speaking. What was that it spoke of? Cintra! What was Cintra now?

"I see that it is no use my talking to you, Mr. Carteret. I shall never persuade you into the belief that you are mistaken. . . ."

"We were mistaken, once. Or—how do you mean mistaken?"

"In allowing yourself to be so easily discouraged."

Fred collected words for explicit speech. "The way you put it does not give the facts correctly. Pardon me, dear Miss Hinchliffe, if I seem to—to contradict you flatly. I must do it, in the interests of truth . . ."

"Which are always so valuable. Go on!"

"The word discouragement conveys a false impression. It does not apply to the position. I am ashamed to confess it, but it is true for all that, that . . ." It stuck in his throat, nevertheless.

"You are never going to say that you have ceased to care for her?"

"Well—I was. At least, it amounts to that. . . . I see what you are going to say, but—allow me! If I had never known—as I most certainly do—that her own sentiments towards me had changed, it would have been exactly the same. I should have ceased to care for Cintra Fraser."

"Then there was a quarrel!"

"There was no quarrel!"

"Then there was some reason. Love never changed to Indifference yet without a reason. Come, Mr. Carteret, you have told me so much that if you keep anything back now, you will only set me guessing—and I shall guess wrong! Shall I help you? There was a reason, and a very distinct reason. And that reason was—another woman! . . . I see I'm right."

For Fred was looking very like a handsome thief, detected. She did not stop short, but continued:—"And Miss Fraser knows, and knows who she is."

There was a kind of desperation in Fred's voice as he answered:—"That is so. But not a living soul else knows it—"

or ever will. Least of all the girl herself. . . . I beg and pray of you most earnestly, dear Miss Hinchliffe, that you will ask me no further questions about this. And—please!—say *nothing* to Charley about it. I shall tell him all I have told you, perhaps more.”

How much Miss Hinchliffe really knew, or suspected, who shall say? She certainly knew all Fred had told her, and that may have been as much as she sought to know. She acquiesced readily in Fred’s wish that she should ask no further questions, saying:—“Very well, then! I won’t bother you any more, since it’s no use. But it’s a terrible disappointment to me and to Charley that we are not to live in our air-castle at The Cedars. The next news will tell us that they have sold the place to someone else. Exactly the sort of thing that always happens. And we shall be doomed to some horrible house in a row, near Hyde Park, I suppose. One thing I’ve quite settled, that we won’t go and live with mamma as she wants us to do. If there is one place I hate more than another it is Wimpole Street. Besides, there are other objections.”

They turned and walked back the way they had come, chatting impersonally; and Fred recovered his equanimity. So far, that is to say, as a man may be said to have an even mind who is, painfully as well as pleasurably, conscious of enslavement. Every word, every look, every smile was a new rivet in the manacles that were—so far as he could see—to bind him for all time. And purposelessly too, so far as he could assign a reason to an unprovoked decree of a capricious Fate. Could he break himself in, to bear the position it created, or would he have to run away from his old friend, to escape from his wife? The position would be maddening; it was so now, and would grow worse with time. His only escape would be to run away from himself and—there was the sting of it—from his old friend. How would he account for his action to Charley?

A crazy thought fluttered in his distempered brain, as she chatted on equably about the advantage to young couples of keeping their relations out of their housekeeping; especially their mothers, however dear. Fred’s distraction was prompting him to speculate as to whether a possible release from his bondage might not be found in a bold declaration of his passion, always in reliance on this girl’s icy indifference to himself, her immutable fidelity to his friend!

But could that little drama be carried through without Charley coming to the knowledge of it? The lady in Mrs. Browning’s

poem presumably never told her Walter anything about that little stramash which came of the gentleman's diseased impulse to confess the truth at any cost. He ought to have had urgent business, calling him to London, or Paris, or Tokio. Anywhere somewhere else! Fred may have had sub-misgivings that he could not rely on so stoical an indifference in the present case as the lady's. Granting that Miss Hinchliffe appreciated Charley as much as *she* did her Walter—why, his course would be clear enough! Open his heart out, listen patiently to a psycho-ethical analysis of the position, and promise not to do so any more. But, to do full justice to this *scenario*, ought not the leading lady to be a cold-blooded prig? He dismissed the crazy thought.

The silence which ended their half-hour's chat was almost more trying to Fred than its subject-matter had been. He was half in favour of feeling relieved when she ended it by turning to him on the steps of her mother's house and saying, with a lemon-coloured hand stretched out for farewell:—"Good-bye then, as it's no use. But you *will* think it over again though—won't you? Say you will."

A little indulgence that could do no harm, surely, to say in a man-of-the-worldly kind of way:—"I will do any mortal thing, Miss Hinchliffe, to give you pleasure. But it won't be any good."

She said again, with those eyes fixed dreamily upon him:—"Good-bye then—as it's no use."

"Good-bye, Miss Hinchliffe!" He had just turned away when her voice followed him, calling him by name. "Yes, Miss Hinchliffe, what?" said he.

"Oh, it's too silly of me to drag you back. Please never mind!"

"But I *do* mind. What was it?"

"Almost an absurd thing. But you have just called me it twice."

"Called you what?"

"Called me 'Miss Hinchliffe.' Do you know what I shall call you next time I see Charley?"

"No—yes I do, though! Probably 'Fred.' Because Charley always insists on my speaking of you as . . . well!—Lucy. When we are talking together you know, no one else there!"

"What a sense of delicacy! Considering my feelings, quite!" She laughed a silvery laugh, which Fred could answer back. She continued:—"I can't say I've been as good a girl

as you have a boy. I cannot swear to having religiously spoken of you as 'Mr. Carteret' always—everywhere! In fact, my impression is that this very day I have talked of you as 'Fred' to that nice girl at your mother's—whom Charley hates, by the way. . . ."

"Oh—Elbows!"

"I believe that is the horrible name you have thought fit to apply to her."

"It was Charley's invention. I merely accepted it."

"You should have resented it."

"It's only a *sobriquet*, you know. It doesn't imply anything." Fred felt quite apologetic about this designation, for which he was not responsible. His mind went sadly back to the occasion of its first appearance as a nickname—the dance where the two young men had met the two sisters—and their utter unconsciousness of the things that were to be. He remembered their walking homewards at an unearthly hour in the morning, and how Charley chaffed him about the very pretty girl he had stuck so close to all the evening, whose father was said to be the Professor Fraser. And how, when he said that the tall square girl was her sister, Charley said:—"What—Elbows?" And he said was that her name? And Charley said:—"Don't suppose it is! But don't you think it suits her?" That was the genesis of that name, in the sweet light of a midsummer morning, hours before the Milk, early enough in fact to be nominally last night. Nearly two years since now! To think of all that had happened in those two years! Fred felt very old.

Would he not be glad—the thought was a flash in the mind's pan, past in an instant—that he should awake now, as from a dream, and only remember those beautiful eyes that held him in thrall; those beautiful lips that were speaking to him, the words they said, that seemed so much and were so little, as the mischievous delusions of a night? But how far back would he have the dream to go? When should sleep have come upon him? Oh, he knew. He would have the dream begin from his first sight of his friend's *fiancée*. Or, better still, from the hour of his uncle's disappearance, that sombre background to every thought in life. How he would rejoice to hear that draconic voice again! But, for the girl that stood there before him, in the dying evening glow, was it in him to awaken from her presence, and not wish to sleep again?

What were the beautiful lips saying, that he should miss two

words of it? He had only lost some just condemnation of Nancy Fraser's nickname—that was all. Peterfield, the butler, was holding the door open for his young mistress to enter, with an appearance on his face of respectful indignation at being kept waiting. This man always seemed, Fred thought, to have just come away from a Cabinet Council, and to want to get back.

"Now remember!" said the lips, seriously, not jestingly. "Next time, it is not to be Miss Hinchliffe. Let Charley have his way—he likes it so. . . . Now—*what* is it to be, next time?"

"Lucy. I suppose I'm not bound to wait till next time? Good-night, Lucy! You'll see Charley before I shall—he's coming this evening, isn't he?—so tell him how docile I was."

"All right! I'll do you justice. Good-night . . . Fred!" She threw him his name, with a smile that went far to stultify her stipulation that it was for Charley's sake. Was she aware, all the while, that this trivial familiarity would have its zest, for a victim?

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PART II

CHAPTER XIX

THE CEDARS was not rechristened when Mr. Charles Snaith and his beautiful young wife started housekeeping there. What did it matter to them that its high reputation as a lunatic asylum had been earned for it under that name a hundred years ago. The son of its first owner had died an old man fifteen years since, and a clause in the lease had prohibited its use otherwise than as a dwelling-house by any tenant after that said first lessee's death and that of the son whom he was educating to his own profession. Its great size and the cost of repairs and modernisations had no doubt stood in the way of the sale of the remainder-lease ever since it came on the market; and it was, in point of fact, considered very surprising that it should have found a private tenant at all.

However, there on the lawn were the two noble Cedars of Lebanon that gave it its name, well worth—so said Mrs Charles Snaith, the beauty, to her many visitors—at least half the two thousand pounds mamma had paid for the twenty-two years unexpired. So why change it? Also, owing to a special proviso in the contract with the builder for repairs, the old porch of lichen stone remained intact. For Mr. Snaith had brought his legal acumen to bear on the phrasing of this contract, to the effect that should the builder molest, injure, or alter in the smallest degree one jot or one tittle of sundry features of the building therein specified, he should reinstate same, antiquity and all, within three months. It was unfortunate that he was never called on to fulfil this condition. If it were only known how to restore the antiquity of an ancient building, how happy Archæology would be!

Charley Snaith had suffered many questionings of his inner conscience as to whether he ought to allow—still less induce—his friend Fred Carteret to supervise the numerous adjustments and modifications needed to bring the old house up to date. It would excruciate the soul of that young man, to the extent perhaps of handicapping his omniscience, to be brought into daily contact with comparisons of his original plans, those of the contemplated joint tenancy, and the ones finally adopted. Miss Hinchliffe showed true delicacy of feeling, and shrank

from reminding Mr. Carteret of the painful collapse of the original castle-in-the-air. She was, however, keenly alive to the fortitude and common sense which her husband's friend showed about his extinct engagement. "He is so *right*," she said, "not to allow himself to be influenced by nonsensical, unreal fancies. It is your duty and mine, Charles, to assist him against himself. . . . Dear me—how like a book I am talking!" Nevertheless, Charles submitted, there was something to be said for the text of that book. His conscience was at rest, keeping in view its decision that it was his duty to assist Fred against himself.

Would Fred have required any such assistance—supposing that he really did, now—if his friend had been wedded with less lustrous eyes, less pearly teeth, a less bewitching voice? Well—how much less? After all, that's the point.

As much less, suppose we say, as Miss Skinner's, Cintra's friend! The story finds that this hypothesis throws a light on the situation. For had it been a credible one, Fred surely would not only have needed assistance, but compulsion, to induce him to near the house at all. He would have been content to leave the alterations to any builder, and to see his friend every day at his chambers; for Charles did not end his connection with the diggings, so called. As it was, he certainly seemed to require no assistance against himself towards compliance with his friend's wish that he should make the house his own. He might have welcomed any help in the contrary direction had he become alive to the danger of his position. He may have done so by fits and starts. But misgivings about the safety of *laissez-faire* never lasted long enough to make him take the only step that would have been efficient against its perils.

It is easy to say now that he ought to have gone away—ought to have run from the self that he was when a three-days-a-week guest at The Cedars, and found another and wiser self in change and incident elsewhere. But who is qualified to preach upon the subject except he has been in the same position? Think what is meant by the clash between two of the strongest human affections in one human soul; the one of them the closest tie of friendship that can link man to man, the other the pitiless magnetism of mere beauty. For that describes in a word the thralldom in which Fred had been entangled by Miss Hinchliffe; still exercised by her, perhaps consciously, as Mrs. Charles Snaith. And to Fred, Charley remained still the boy with a large nose whom he took into his heart without reserve on the

very first day of their school life; who had been Pythias to his Damon day by day and hour by hour ever since.

The sway of such a friendship is the most powerful influence known to man, except the love of woman. And one variety of this last is as a burning fire; the sort that is kindled by what the story had just called, in compliance with convention, mere beauty. Why *mere*, Heaven knows, when it has all but the power of gold—gold that can make foul fair, wrong right, base noble, and warp the best man's heart against himself. It is a love that calls for no return, a fire that rages with no fuel beyond what sight and hearing can supply. It is strangely independent of its object's sentiments; indeed, in some cases that object's scorn only stimulates it. But it is omnipotent for mischief, and he who speaks lightly of the Cyprian goddess had best beware that he is well outside her realm. Many peaceful and blameless lives of men might have been quite otherwise had Fate carried them to the neighbourhood of the Venusberg.

So the story asks you to pity Fred, not to blame him. Say, if you will, that his good and evil Angels were at grips for his soul, but admit that he himself was on the side of the former—a constant backer. And note this—that it was impossible for him to withdraw from the zone of danger, without also seeming to fly from the zone of friendship. How could he account to Charley for his change of front, if he abruptly ceased to make a home of The Cedars? True, he might have been seized with a sudden intense desire for foreign travel, and thereby given his good Angel a chance for a right-swing home on the jaws of his opponent. But how about his duty to his mother? A short absence would be useless. Indeed, could any absence be long enough? And how could he leave her alone, to brood over the past, to nurse the nightmare imagination of his uncle's murder—murder, perhaps; unexplained death, certainly—while he ranged free over the wide world?

If she would have consented to accompany him, all ends might have been served. And no doubt she would have done so had he said to her:—"I am distracted for love of my friend's wife, and cannot get out of range of her eyes that madden me, her voice that cuts me like a knife; and I cannot make my friend the confidant of my reason for doing so. Help me by assenting to my conviction, and his, that *you* would benefit by a complete change of scene, and so warrant my absence as your companion." But it was impossible for him even to hint at more than the last

suggestion of this. He managed to get so far, certainly. But his mother stopped him peremptorily. She was all in favour of *his* going, but nothing would induce *her* to leave home; not even the pleasure of showing her son the old Flemish towns where she and her husband had spent their honeymoon thirty-odd years ago. To go away with the terrible burden of this undiscovered mystery upon her of her brother-in-law's death—she always spoke of it as a certainty—would be no relief or relaxation to her. Nothing would be that, except illumination as to its cause. That she was convinced he had been murdered only made matters worse. If she could have believed any of the theories of accidental death that had been launched without data of any sort, she would have been as happy in one place as another, and would have accompanied her son for his sake; but he must take her word for it that she was happiest in her own home, where the Doctor would find all unchanged if—if—some strange combination of unknown events should come to light, and yield him up, after all, uninjured.

Let anyone who has ever had a difficult confession to make say how he would have had Fred Carteret word such a one as his would have been, even to his own mother.

For him, the secret communings with himself—a regular system of self-torture whenever he found himself alone—always ended the same way. The easiest and the only course open to him was to live his life out as best he might, always making dissimulation absolute in the presence of his friend. That was the one great point he had to keep in view. Like the Spartan bitten beneath his cloak by the fox he was concealing, Fred choked back every approach to an expression of pain. So long as he conceived that his passion was unsuspected by its object, his was no half-hearted secrecy. As for poor Charley, he was unsuspicion itself.

And the creator of all this turmoil, how far was she aware of her handiwork? The story hesitates to say. Is it possible that that very disagreeable woman whom Mrs. Browning imagined into a position much like that of Mrs. Lucy Snaith was all the while chuckling in her inmost heart to think how great her power was over this fool of a man? Him and his *love*, forsooth! Look at her position of vantage! How could anything assail it? What had she been guilty of, except existence? And yet, had she been brought to trial before a jury of her own sex, which of the jurywomen would have acquitted her? And among her own friends even, would not one or two have been found to say

that Sukey—or Sophonisba, or whatever her name was—knew perfectly well what she was about all the time?

However, the story hopes. That is all it can do, with its very imperfect information about the inmost souls of its characters. Perhaps Lucy Snaith was innocence itself, at this date—was utterly in the dark about her husband's friend's innermost, and its perturbations. Perhaps her smiles were only meant for his outworks; her rich voice for his ears only, not for his heart. Perhaps, when he was pending, she never stood before a mirror thinking what that beautiful form would look best in, or schemed a vision for his eyes before she went to dress. Perhaps.

"I tell you what, Fred," said Charley one evening, as they ended the week with a pipe apiece, like Corydon and Alexis:—"You'll have to persuade your mother to go away somewhere for a change. If she sticks on at the Vale, peaking and pining about this business . . . Oh yes, I know! It's an awful business! . . . she won't do any good, and she'll be an old woman in a year or so. Then, all of a sudden, the Doctor will turn up, and it'll all be wasted."

"What will all be wasted?"

"All her peaking and pining. All thrown away!"

This, or something near it, was a sort of standard conversation, to be continued or not. Fred's reply was continuation, of a sort. "Do you mean to say, Charley, that you expect ever to see the old Doctor alive again? . . . No, I expect you don't—any more than I do." This last was a private record of inner conviction, whatever his friend might say.

But Charley was not going to yield the point. "My dear Frederic," said he, "you are not looking at the thing from the right angle. A great deal turns—as you ought to know, considering you are an engineer—on the angles people look at things from. Have the goodness to look—metaphorically—over my shoulder, and endeavour to see the thing as I see it. I share the conviction of each of my fellow-creatures, that everyone else will benefit by seeing things as he sees them."

"Cut along, old Prosy!"

This seemed an appeal for seriousness, and was accepted as such. "Have you had any further conversation with Manton about the case—the police officer?" Charley waited, his pipe in his fingers and his eyes on his friend, as though something turned on his question.

"No, I haven't. Why?"

"Because I have. I saw him last week. I didn't mention it, for fear of making too much of it. But you may just as well know what he said. He had called at Trymer's to take instructions about another business, and when he had got them I asked him what he thought now about your case. To my surprise his answer was:—"I think just what I thought three months after Dr. Carteret's disappearance. He might turn up at any moment." Trymer asked him what his views were as to the possible cause of such a disappearance, and he said he had none. 'Then,' said Trymer, 'how on earth can you believe his reappearance possible?'"

"Ah—how could he? I thought him a muddle-headed sort of chap."

"He's sharper than you think. There's something to be said for his view of the matter. . . . I was trying to think of his exact words. . . ."

"I should certainly like to know them."

"He said:—'You think I'm talking nonsense, Mr. Trymer. But I assure you that in all the dozen or so of disappearances I have known, the guesswork about the cause has been all wrong in at least four-fifths of the cases. As for the odd fifth, the parties that guessed right always had something to guide 'em. We've got nothing!'"

"Almost nothing!"

"Well—what have we?"

"H'm—well!—at least we know where he was last seen. In this very identical house."

"How does that help us?"

Fred tried to look as if what he was going to say would be very convincing when he uttered it. But he had not thought of what it was to be; and when Charley said, as one who expects enlightenment:—"Well?", he had no answer ready. So he said he didn't know that it did come to much after all, when you came to think of it.

"Comes to nothing," said his friend. "And yet it remains the only trace of a clue—if it can be called a clue—that we have." Then, as the conversation had gravitated into a well-worn channel, it lapsed. The two young men smoked over it reflectively, until a corollary suggested itself.

"I wonder," said Fred, "if those two old images are still come-at-able. You know who I mean? The caretakers who had come for a month or so, and lived here a decade or so. What's become of them?"

"Didn't I—hear—my missus—say," said Charley, with slow consideration,—“that some means of tracing these images still existed? I'm pretty sure she did, but whether it was through an individual or a corporate body of some sort, I couldn't say. The exact expression my wife used was:—‘The Wash knows.’”

“Can it be approached—the Wash—and enquiry made?” Fred asked doubtfully, as though his question referred to the Bank of England or the Privy Council.

“I am told that it comes in person on Friday evenings in its cart, for it has a cart. I suspect it of being the same thing that talks continuously in the kitchen for an hour, chiefly reporting conversations it has had elsewhere. I have heard it, through open windows, in my dressing-room, so I know. It cannot be communicated with directly; there must be an intercessor and mediator.”

“Would not . . .” Fred began.

“Lu know?” Her husband finished the question, filling in the name for his friend as he often did, to a peculiar pause, which he had become very familiar with. “Yes—she must be the intercessor and mediator. Suppose we go and ask her! Done your pipe?” Fred had come to the end of it, or said so, and the two sought the drawing-room.

“Come at last!” said the beautiful young mistress of The Cedars, stretching herself and yawning like any school-boy. Of course we all know that it's unladylike to stretch, because it takes the arms away from the sides, and invites the confidence of the Universe about one's outline. But it may be done gracefully or ungracefully, however disgracefully. Lucy's method was consistent with the first, and claimed exemption from the third, as there was no company. Fred was not company; no house-cat was more *apprivoisé*.

“I don't see that we are so *very* late,” says the master of the house, humbly. “It's not ten yet.”

“I relied upon *you*,” says the young lady to Fred, reproachfully. “However, I forgive you this once, now you *have* come.” She forgave him with both eyes, as the stretch abated, ending in a slight counterstretch downwards, and a repressed yawn. “What am I to sing, please?” The question was nearly one long word, spoken through the yawn without consonants.

Her husband, by this time seeking for the leader in the *Morning Post*, said absently but cheerfully:—“Sing, sing, what shall I sing? I say, I always wonder whether that party got the pudding-ringing back from the cat, or not.”

Lucy ignored the remark. "What *shall* I?" said she to Fred exclusively. Charley was rather outside the music zone, and did not resent this, but settled down to his leader. Presently, however, he remembered something, as his wife and friend together turned over Italian music of two hundred years ago, wavering between this and that. "By-the-bye," said he—"those two old fogies!"

His wife said:—"Those two old whats?" And Fred said:—"Oh, ah yes—by the way! How about Mr. and Mrs. Klem?" For this name had been substituted for that of Grewbeer in honour of Dickens's caretakers in the "Uncommercial Traveller."

Charles explained. "The deaf parties. The old woman who was the owner of a sink. Don't you remember, Lu? Why, she very nearly put you off taking the house!" The lady remembered, with expression of abhorrence for an unforgotten flavour. "Well—didn't I understand that these parties could be traced; in fact, that their whereabouts was known to a person, or persons, or company, or confederation, or league, or firm, known as 'The Wash'?"

"I suppose you mean the laundress. Very likely she knows. You must ask Modicum to ask her, when she brings the wash on Friday. She sees her. What do you want with the caretakers?" But the lady did not wait for an answer, going back to Stradella and Galuppi. "It's a tenor song, 'Star vicino.' But of course I can sing it if you particularly want it." Then she harked back, as though further reflection had roused curiosity. "Well, Charles, aren't you going to tell us—what you want with the caretakers, I mean!" She had already come to treat her husband as most ladies do, in a year or so; a harmless creature he, with strange fads, to be tolerated when the lady has time for toleration, not otherwise.

"Fred wants 'em. Wants to keep 'em in sight, anyhow." Charles was trying to read the leader at the same time, so he treated the subject as lapsable, and lapsed it. Fred nodded an affirmative to Lucy's look of enquiry, and added explanation:—"You see, the old woman was the very last person who set eyes on my uncle. It's no clue, because it's known that he left the house. But I don't want to lose touch with her—in case . . ."

Charles laid down his paper to correct an important point. "Not the very last person!" said he. "Because the boy—supposing his denial of the fact to be false—saw him go out of the gate towards Wimbledon."

"But he didn't speak to him?" This was his wife.

Fred said:—"That's what I meant. One means 'talk' by 'see.' As for the boy, he *must* have seen him go out. Most likely he didn't stay to mind the horse at all, and won't confess up. He went off after a friend. After all, a boy's a boy."

"Yes, I don't think much of the boy's evidence, one way or the other. But anyway, Dr. Carteret went out of the house, or he would be in it still, to a certainty." Fred saw, but the speaker did not notice, his wife's slight movement of protest or dissent—or rather change of expression—but continued:—"The Wash may be legitimately asked to furnish Mrs. Klem's address, anyhow. You'll see to it, dearest, won't you?" But his wife's attention was already given to her search for a song, and he had to resay his last words:—"Won't you, dearest?"

"Oh yes—let me see—the old caretaker's address. You must remember to remind me when Modicum's here. Mind you do!" The song was found in a volume, and taken to the piano. Fred followed to turn the pages. He is her slave, but his slavery is a misery to him. He cannot see the end of it.

He almost hopes she will keep those eyes on the song. And yet when they come round full upon him he accepts their intoxication, for how can he do otherwise? "Have I not an uncomfortable husband?" she asks; at first, to Fred, inexplicably. Then in answer to his evident incomprehension, she explains. "So creepy to say . . . You don't mind my talking about it?"

"No—why should I?"

"To say that if Dr. Carteret didn't go out of the house he must be in it still! Don't you think so?"

"I'm not sure that I see why, exactly."

"It seemed to me an idea to have cold creeps about. That's all." She adjusted the music on the piano, but used the time occupied in doing so to say to Fred, for his ears only:—"Who's to know that that boy isn't speaking the truth?"

Fred said:—"Does it make any difference?" But the leader-reader had caught the upshot, and said over his shoulder:—"Of course it doesn't! The fact that a boy hasn't seen a person go out of a house proves nothing. It's the most negative evidence possible. But the fact that a person is known not to be in a house is positive evidence that he's gone out of it."

"I s-see," said his wife, languidly, to show her indifference to such subjects. But the sting of her indifference, like the poison in the rattlesnake's tail, was in her postscript. "How

long does it take to know that a person isn't in a house?" she asked. "Can you do it right off?"

Her husband saw shoal-water ahead, and starboarded—or ported—his helm. "It's more a matter of practice, my love, than evidence," said he. "One is practically certain a person isn't in a house when one has lived in it without seeing him long enough."

"If one is grown up, I suppose?"

"Don't understand."

"I understand that boys not seeing people come out of houses proved nothing. So I suppose the persons who don't see them inside the houses must be grown up, to prove anything."

"I say, Luce!—you're horribly sharp. Isn't she, Fred?—sharp as a razor." He was proud of his wife's cleverness—which Fred more than admitted—but always with reservations, in the background, connected with the fact that women's wits, compared with men's, are *hors de concours*. To Fred, her brilliancy seemed dazzling. Why is it that, when men are entranced by a woman's beauty, the slightest manifestation of human intelligence on her part is regarded by their devotee as miraculous?

Charley became absorbed in his leader. Mrs. Hinchliffe, who had been reading and dozing on the sofa-chair, took her candle and retired for the night. Mrs. Charles, remarking that she was not going for a long time yet, found another song to sing.

Fred, fatally absorbed, hung on every note. This was all in harmony with what had gone on every evening Fred spent at The Cedars; and those evenings were many. Charles was so glad his friend and his wife should be so like brother and sister.

He went into the library to get a book, and couldn't find it offhand. The song finished in his absence, and the singer turned to her enthralled listener, saying rather to his surprise, for he thought the subject forgotten:—"It doesn't make Charles uncomfortable. Odd— isn't it?" He had no doubt what she was referring to. The book seeker was far enough off, turning over leaves, so it was not the fear of being overheard that kept Fred from saying:—"No—why should he be uncomfortable?" It was the fact that he himself never entered the house without the thought crossing his mind that he would be so much better satisfied had his uncle been traced to some place he only knew by name, and had never set foot in. That image of Dr. Carteret, as Mrs. Grewbeer had reported on him, talking to himself at this

end of the long passage to the greenhouse, refused to make its exit from the chambers of Fred's imagination.

So he left Charles's oddness, or otherwise, an open question, and took refuge in generalities. It was, of course, all nervous fancy, because we knew, practically, that the missing man had gone away to Wimbledon to catch the five-thirty from Waterloo. But what a powerful agency nervous fancy was! He confessed to the way in which his own got possession of him. Charley was exactly the same, only he wouldn't admit it. He thought it was his duty to pooh-pooh things, and call them subjective. After all, what was more subjective than a nightmare, and what misery was more grievous than a bad one?

rs. Lucy, still seated at the piano, listened unimpressed—so it seemed—to the gentleman's dutiful recital of indisputable truths. Her beautiful left hand touched the notes of some phrase that remained unheard, tantalising the keys. She played it over again in a short silence that followed; then said with her dangerous eyes behind their dropped lids, looking down on her fingers:—"Are *we* so nervous then, you and I, Fred? I had not thought so—not of myself, at least." And Fred half formed in his inmost heart a prayer that those eyes would keep in ambush, with that gold ring on the piano-hand's third finger all but exclaiming aloud:—"Remember me!"

The story's aim is to dwell, so far as may be, on moments like this, that its reader may find excuse for this young man. It finds many, itself; scarcely perhaps in this one instance, so much as in its sequel.

For his infatuation, or his Evil Star, or both, egged him on to an analysis most safely left alone—symptoms are always perilous!—and made him say:—"Perhaps I didn't mean nervous fancies exactly in that sense. I was referring to a tendency of the mind. The expression—as it is used—connects itself with fever—something feverish. . . ."

Lucy suddenly raised her eyes from her jewelled fingers; unmasked a concealed battery, as it were! "Am I feverish?" said she. "Feel my pulse, and be convinced!" A dowdy of heartfelt stuffiness might have done this unblamed. But to stretch out such a hand as that, backed by such a glance, endorsed by such a smile! Was it fair?

Fred could not take flight. That was not open to him.

But he would have done so if he could. Standing committed as he did to whatever falsehood was necessary to the only part possible to him—that of cold friendship—it was clear that the

more thoroughly he played the part the better. He accepted the rôle of medical attendant for the nonce, and drew out his watch, which had a second hand.

"Feeling pulses? What's the fun?" Thus Charley, coming all unconscious from the next room with a captured book. His good-humoured acquiescence in anything—in everything—had a kind of reassurance in it for Fred. Clearly, his own *ignes suppositi* were idiosyncrasy. A normal, reasonable man could touch that hand without a tremor, could meet those eyes without flinching.

"Never you mind, Mr. Inquisitiveness!" says the lady. "Seventy something, isn't it, Fred? It's sure to be that. I know that much!" Fred reports seventy-four, and puts his watch away. "Now, what's yours?"

But Fred won't keep his watch out. "It's no use comparing it with mine," says he. "Mine always gallops." Then to Charley, amused but awaiting enlightenment:—"You see, nervousness was under discussion, and I said one might suffer from mental nervousness without what is commonly called by the name—physical nervousness. . . ."

"You said"—thus Lucy, striking in—"that nervousness and feverishness were much of a muchness. And I said I wasn't feverish—witness my pulse! That's where we got to pulses—Fred and I."

"Are you satisfied, old chap?" says Charley.

Fred laughs. "Lucy's as cool as any cucumber," he says.

"But that proves my position."

"Which is?"

"That one may be mentally nervous without any feverishness at all."

"What's the mental nervosity this time?" says the subject's husband, caressing her. "What are we in a stew about?"

"Nothing. . . . It's late. Suppose we go to bed!"

"All right. But what is it? Mustn't I be told?"

"Not by me. I'm going to bed. Fred must tell you. Ask him." This had to be enough for the moment.

Now, it must be understood that the sitting-room where this conversation took place was a passage-room; had a door at either end. The two flights of stairs gave a choice of which end of a lobby a stair-climber preferred. The obvious one for Mrs. Charles Snaith's exit was the one further from the main staircase; and nearest to the back staircase, near Mrs. Klem's former quarters. For some reason, this time, she chose the

latter—the much longer way. But her candle was in the other lobby, and Charles must get it for her. Competition ensued for the privilege of discovering and lighting it, and Fred reached the door first, going away through the room beyond, candle seeking.

In his absence, the talk ran as follows:

"I say, sweetheart, of course a real lady has a right to go to bed up any staircase she likes, but when her candlestick's at the South Pole . . ."

"It's her concern, anyhow. You know mamma has heard from Lady Humphrey Pordage, whose odious dinner-party is put off. Isn't it a blessing?"

"An awful blessing! With every sentiment of respect, esteem, and veneration for her ladyship—damn Lady Humphrey Pordage! . . . But I say—look here! Be a ducky darling and tell me reasons why. I mean why you like that staircase so much better than the other."

"Never mind!"

"Yes—but do tell your loving husband. Remember he may beat you with any stick no thicker than his thumb!"

"Silly Charles! . . . Well—you know perfectly well. It's that dreadful old man of Fred's. We've been talking about him and it's brought it all back."

"But—you goosey!—he was ever so far on. I mean when the old sink proprietor saw the last of him. He was out away near the green'us."

"Well—I know that as well as you do. But he had just come down by the big stairs. You said Old Sinkey said so. There's Fred." It was, and the conversation ended. The lady departed.

This narrative aims at Psychology. So it may note as curious a memory that stirred in Fred's mind at this moment. A distinct recollection of a day-dream of two years ago crossed it; a day-dream of the double household and the young mistresses of each, each on her own staircase; the fair one—the might-have-been—painfully inferior to the one that had become a reality! There on that stairway, a few yards off, was she at this moment, where his fancy had placed her two years ago!

Would it have been harder to stifle his underlying fires had Cintra become his wife? Had he and she been man and wife now, in the halved house with the doubled household, would the ashes that concealed them now have been one whit more treacherous, the *cinis* one particle more *dolosus*? But how about

the duplicity of his concealment *then*; its activity of simulation, set against the passivity of mere dissimulation *now*? The last was *possible*, he knew, though difficult. Would his powers as an actor have been sufficient for the former part? No—Cintra had acted wisely in forestalling and avoiding the situation.

Forsake Psychology, and go back to fact. When the two young men were left alone after the young lady's departure, her husband turned to his friend, saying:—"Rum, isn't it?"

"What's rum?" said Fred.

"The way Lu wrong-sherries"—an obvious perversion of a French word, quite understandable—"over that unfortunate knowledge of where Dr. Carteret was last seen. It quite spoils one side of the house. I wish to gracious goodness I had never told her of it."

"Couldn't one do anything?"

"Do *what*?" Fred couldn't say, and Charles continued:—"I know she has got a fixed image in her mind of the old boy coming down those stairs, based on Mrs. Drewbeer—Strewbeer—Grewbeer—Mrs. Klem's statement, in fact." Fred could understand that, he said. He himself was subject to ideas of the sort, associating people with places. Charles added, "Then she walks the image on as far as Mrs. Klem's evidence goes, and it gets stuck, just at this end of the greenhouse passage."

Fred said, after reflection:—"I suppose if the untruthful boy had testified that he saw my uncle on his way to Wimbledon, that would have set her mind at rest."

"Yes—she would have been able to think of your uncle striding along the main road to catch the five-thirty. As it is—I can't say for certain of course, but I suspect it's true for all that—she has got it on her mind that your uncle never . . . It's quite crazy, you know—a sort of waking nightmare. A day-mare, as you might say!"

"Cut along, old boy! That my uncle never—what? What didn't he do?"

"That your uncle never left the house at all!" Charles spoke in rather a subdued way, and watched Fred to see what effect this idea would have on him. It had never been hinted at, except as an example of the impossible; but for all that, Charles felt shy of propounding it, in case it should get hold of Fred's mind, and work disquiet in it. His wife's daymare might be infectious.

"Never left the house at all!" Fred repeated, but uncomfortably. "Well—we can dismiss *that*. But the question is

can't we do anything to disabuse—*her?*” Fred nodded towards the door Lucy had gone out by.

“Oh no—hardly necessary. She'll forget all about it soon enough.”

“It's a good long time. More than a year, anyhow.”

“The only thing I can see,” said Charley, with slow consideration, “is to get at that boy, and make him testify.”

“Suppose he testifies wrong? Suppose he sticks to his story, I mean.”

“Yes—that's a fix. But he only says he *didn't* see your uncle, after all. What we want is someone who *did* see him, and saw him go out. If anyone would only be so good as to *think* he saw him, that would set Lu's mind at rest. Would it be any good to try to convince the old man that he or his wife *must* have seen him go out because he unquestionably *did* go out? He would recollect seeing him for a pound, no doubt. But one isn't exactly Sampson Brass. . . . I say, it's getting on for one o'clock to-morrow morning.”

They lighted candles and departed to rest, making a parade of going the usual way, up the main staircase. But a restless spirit was on them about the old unsolved mystery, that would not let them ignore the place that was mixed up with it. At the foot of the stairs Fred stopped and looked along the passage to his left. He never passed it without an uncanny consciousness of its story, and how his mind was full of it. The image of the vanished man was on him, and oppressed him. If, by some strange turn of events, his old guardian should reappear, safe and well, how would he answer his enquiries about things that had happened in his absence? He could fit the speech:—“And what became of the madhouse, nephew?” so easily to the magisterial voice that had become, provisionally at least, a thing of the Past.

Charley answered his pause, as though it had been speech. “One sees exactly how it is,” said he. “It's because there's a kink in the passage, and he was just round the corner. If one saw the place itself, and saw there was no one there, it wouldn't give anyone the jumps. I can quite understand Lu's idea. If I was a delicate female, no doubt I should feel precisely the same. . . . I say, how would it be to put a curtain across the passage?”

“Make it worse!” said Fred, decisively. “When I was a small kid, I was always frightened at what was on the other side of a curtain. No—a door, if you like!”

"Well, then, a door. Lots of room for it! Too much."

"We could make it up with panelling. All that's easy." Obviously so.

Any scheme for an alteration in a house is fascinating, even at two in the morning, and Fred produced his invariable foot-rule, to allot the proportions to that door and its panellings. "You see," said the architect; "this was the wall of the old house, and when they cut through it to connect with the new bit they put a bressummer across. So a seven-foot door will work in nicely without any panelling across the top. That's a partition you are up against, put in when they made the passage. It's carried on a small girder over the kitchen."

"I see," said Charley. "Of course that's why the kitchen's such a jolly lot larger than the room above it. They didn't cut a passage off."

"They didn't want one. There would be nowhere to go to. The new building's all above ground."

"Are you sure? Isn't there a cellar?"

"No cellar—quite sure! Why—look here!" The solid resistance to his heel, as he struck it down on the floor, said concrete inexorably.

Charles looked doubtful. "I thought," said he, "that I heard hollowness underneath, in the long passage, the other day."

"Where?" said Fred.

"Try it and see!" Charles passed him, and turned round the corner, where the old Doctor had been left by Mrs. Klem, stamping on the ground to detect hollowness. But he was little over half-way, when he stopped short, saying:—"Yes—what?" For Fred had called after him, inexplicably. And, still more inexplicably, he now said, as his friend came back for explanation:—"What did you sing out for, Charley, to me—just now?"

"I say, Fred, this won't do! This is the lunatics again. Do you know that I never go round that corner without your hearing me sing out? I never sang out."

"Yes—you did. At least, I heard you. I thought you had struck ile—at least, struck vacuum. Rather rum!"

"Very rum! . . . I say, there's the missus calling. We shall catch it. Come along!"

At the stair-top, as they hurried bedwards, was a vision of beauty. Its lips parted to say:—"Oh dear!—what a fright you two foolish men have given me! I thought something was the matter." Its hair fell back in great rich clusters, over a mys-

terious Oriental overwrap, that glistened like a tropical snake. Its reproachful eyes flashed through many stray hairs, a scattered crowd that failed to hide them. It was not a vision to sleep upon, but to lie restless and feverish awake about. Fred was in no hurry to get to bed; and when he did, he made a poor show of a night's rest.

At least, there was one consolation. The man that took her in his arms, and kissed those lips for apology and consolation, was Charley, his friend of friends. How it would have saddened Fred had he been any other man!

CHAPTER XX

THE little dachshund at Maida Vale had passed a large fraction of his short life since the story saw him last. That is the worst of dogs, they live so fast, or get through their lives so soon—put it which way you will. The cat, self-absorbed and immutable, was philosophically unconcerned at this, and at everything else, so long as the Purveyor of her Meat—who also claimed to serve the Royal Family—left the same at the house each morning, impaled on a skewer by an expert, who knew exactly how much. She has got over her suspicion of the new servant—for Lipscombe had found an opportunity of bettering herself without growing—and was satisfied that Jane the parlour maid *in case* ate none off the skewer before allotting their respective shares to herself and Liebig. That young woman was bony and knucklesome, and one of her eyes had an appearance of having been taken out and put back recently, so that she had scarcely had time to get used to it. When asked what she would prefer to be called, she had professed indifference, but had thrown out—for the guidance of her new mistress—that she had been called Ogden in her last place. Mrs. Carteret having demurred to this, as almost too drastic a name for a young woman, she had consented to Jane, and had been Jane for three months at the date of the story.

Otherwise, nothing had changed but the colour of the hair of the mistress of the house. It was not quite white; but it meant to be, and every one of her friends knew what was at work to cause the change. The Artistic part of them did not complain, but the contrary. Miss Values, at her Studio, said to Mr. Treatment, who had looked in from his, five hundred Studios down—these names and figures are wrong, but no matter:—"Ought we not, Pindar, don't you know, to be grateful for Trouble when it contributes to Beauty?" For Mr. Treatment was an old friend, and much her junior, so she called him by his Christian name. And he repeated her words later to an ally, with the comment:—"The Old Cat wasn't wrong, for once; only I wish she wouldn't trot out her gormy daubs and ask for my honest opinion of them. Because I have to tell all sorts of rotten lies."

The Old Cat in question was certainly right this time, for there could be no doubt of the addition to Mrs. Carteret's beauty, and little if any of the cause of it. Her face did not suffer, for a slight accent laid by Nature on its bone-structure was only another Beauty, of a new sort. But her son, whose æsthetic education was imperfect, derived no consolation from these facts. His Philistine soul would have rejoiced to know that the weight of their great trouble was growing less, and sparing hers. For her part, she was always cheerful in her words to him, so far as circumstances could be ignored to cheerfulness-point. But he discredited this as *parti pris* for his sake, and indeed that was all that it was.

Nancy Fraser was a constant visitor at the Vale, staying the night as often as not; for a room upstairs was by now familiarly spoken of as "Miss Fraser's apartment." Her presence was an embarrassment to Fred, although he did his best to conceal it. If you put yourself in his place you will easily understand this. There may be young men who after an engagement to marry, broken off, have maintained their connection with the young lady's family. If so, they were unlike Fred, mentally and morally. He and Cintra had taken up an attitude, *quoad* their families, that made interference in their affairs more difficult than one of public recrimination—mutual fault-finding soliciting the sympathies of bystanders. They had laid such stress on their prudence, as a leading motive, that their seconds, or umpires—or whatever they are that hold bottles in this kind of match—were quite nonplussed and reduced to trusting to Providence to see to everything being in order, and nothing happening that could possibly be regretted later. Each family had done its duty in the way of assurance to the other that there was no ill-will borne, and a sufficient number of chats over the position had ended with a *nem:con:* resolution that these things were in wiser hands than ours, and that Time would show. Possibly Time was showing at the date of the story, for the only surviving record of Fred's engagement to Cintra then was the seeming unalterable friendship between her sister and his mother.

A kind of dry geniality was Fred's attitude towards Miss Fraser, who had once been Nancy; and, in her absence, even Elbows. As for hers towards him, she drove a coach-and-six through the *status-quo* nearly every time she spoke. Justification was not wanting for this. It was more easy and natural for her to put his name, as it were, in inverted commas supplied by his mother, than for him to "Cintra" her sister, with an

implication of "as I used to call her," in a parenthesis, every time he did so. He solved the problem by speaking of Cintra as seldom as possible, and, when he did so, calling her "your sister."

It was not long after that evening at The Cedars, just recorded, that Fred, letting himself in with his latchkey at his mother's, stumbled on Nancy in the entrance hall, just turning the corner of the stairs. "Good-evening, Miss Fraser," said he, becoming interested in a letter on the hall-table, to himself. This was dry enough, but geniality had to be attended to. "Professor quite well?" he added perfunctorily, with his finger getting the better of the envelope. His manner said:—"My interest in your father has lapsed, but I entertain Christian sentiments towards him."

"You know you don't care," said the young lady, who was carrying a basket. "But he's perfectly well, as far as that goes. . . . You go on first, because I've got my hands full."

Fred felt it was safest only to speak on what arose strictly from his question. "Glad he's all right. The weather's been trying," said his tongue. But his mind wanted his words to imply:—"With the best of good wishes for your father's health, pray understand that I am absorbed in this, which is important." It—the letter—was only an expression of the sender's ardent desire to lend him, if not a minor, ten thousand pounds on his own security in the strictest confidence. To play his part out, he re-enveloped and pocketed it. "All right," said he. "I'll go on in front. Is my mother in the drawing-room?"

"I left her there," said Nancy. "I've been for the kittens to show her." She raised the basket lid, accounting for small and complex sounds, which interlarded. "Oh, you little darlings!"

"Kittens—are there? What a lark!" His manner was nicely adjusted to express the difference between his interest in kittens carried by a young lady to whose sister he was *fiancé*, and one to whose sister he was not. He went on to his mother upstairs.

She was going to be a wonderfully handsome old lady, certainly; in a few years, be it understood! Her son, acknowledging the beauty, but in revolt against the idea that his mother could ever be a real old woman, never saw her without saying something like this to himself. But he had not risen to Miss Values's standard of beauty worship, and resented the share that he knew pain had had in the evolution of his mother's.

"No news, I suppose, dear?" This had been her first greeting to him always for eighteen months past and seemed likely to last out their joint lives. He shook his head and looked "No," but said nothing. He had to, for there was no news. She checked a sigh, and made for cheerful speech. Her son had been at The Cedars on Sunday, she supposed? Were they both well? How was the baby? The baby was all right, Fred testified. At least, he had concluded that that was the case, having heard nothing to the contrary. "You saw it, I presume?" said his mother. Oh yes—he *had seen* it, of course! Saw it the next morning. Charley had insisted. But did not its mother insist too? asked Mrs. Carteret. "She wasn't very urgent," said her son. "You see, the little beggar is awfully small, and too milky to be safely handled. His mother is rather afraid of him—leaves him to the nurse. He'll be a lot jollier in another three months. Charley quite admits that."

"I have known mothers like that," said Mrs. Carteret.

"It isn't want of affection, you know. Charley says so. It's idiosyncrasy." Fred felt bound to prevent any misinterpretation of Lucy's character, and rejoiced to have Charley on his side.

"I see," said his mother. "It's idiosyncrasy." Then, as he looked rather unhappy over it, she said, to comfort him:—"It often is so. But they come all right in the end." Fred was sorry to have handled this subject of the baby so awkwardly, as it reflected equivocally on its mother—in the eyes of anyone who did not know her as well as he did, added Fred. He had no idea of the length and breadth of his own incapacity to form a judgment in this case.

The story feels guilty on the subject of this baby, as it cannot recall to mind having referred to it. Why could it not wake up and do a little self-assertion? No narrative could have omitted that.

When, a few minutes later, Nancy followed him into the drawing-room, saying:—"Sorry to interrupt you, but the cat says you must look at them, dear, now they've come up," Fred resented the context of events, and was inclined to ignore those kittens, and the two ladies' appreciation of them; especially the younger one's, which was fatuity. "Their mummy sits on them like a fur lid," said she, "and their ducky little noses come popping out." The cat gladly gave a *résumé* of this performance, and appeared to accept the comments of the public on her preposterous vanity as praise. It had its melancholy side, in its

profound unconsciousness that three kittens out of the five were then and there condemned to death. "I'm sorry you *must* have them drowned, dear," said Nancy. "But I admit the necessity. And those three are the most plebeian." An attempt was made to introduce them to Society, but their mother seized them by the throat and dragged them back into retirement. "Oh, very well!" said Nancy. "If you are going to be disagreeable and exclusive, it's time you went back into the cupboard." And they went.

"I thought you were so fond of young creatures, Fred," said Mrs. Carteret when the young lady had vanished with the basket, very incidentally.

"Puppies p'r'aps!" said Fred, equally so. "Never was so specially fond of kittens."

"Have you had tea, Fred?" said his mother. No—he hadn't. Well, then if he would ring the bell, Jane would take the pot and make him some fresh. But he declined, saying that what was left in the pot would do very well for him. She deprecated this course as needless, and said Jane had nothing to do. He, however, had, or took, his own way. One cup seemed enough. But might he smoke a cigarette? Certainly.

He had come to stay on, so there was no need to hurry talk; especially as Nancy, who was going back, would look in directly to say good-night. Fred was aware that she always had to be at home on Thursdays, to help her sister and stepmother to receive in the evenings. So that was his most convenient evening to give his mother, as a fixture—without prejudice to stray indeterminate occasions. He smoked in silence, nursing topics, if any, till later.

Nancy's reappearance, said Mrs. Carteret, was delayed, probably, by the need for pumping up a tyre, or putting oil in a lamp, or screwing up a brake, or elevating a saddle, or some such bicyclic evolution. Near the end of the cigarette, she thought that was the bicyclist coming now. She appeared to ponder over something; a thing to be remembered or a course to be taken. The latter, probably, for she appeared to decide on one; saying, as she looked enquiringly on her son:—"Has she told you?"

"Told me what? No—she has told me nothing."

"Well—it's not bad for anybody, that I know of. So you needn't look scared. Here she comes. Ask her."

"Ask me what?" says Nancy, coming in at the door, in bicycle *tenus*. "Oh yes—Cit of course! I left it for you to tell him."

"Well—I haven't told him. You do!"

"All right. It's engaged to be married to papa's old friend Dr. Lomax. He's a widower with four children, and one of them has necrosis of the joints, or some such game. He's not a real doctor, only a *quack*. They'll be married in the summer when Dr. Lomax gets his holiday."

Fred took this piece of news with admirable discipline. Where was the need for any?—some may say. All the answer the story can give is to ask another question:—"How shall a man who has at one time clasped in his arms what he thought was to be his wife, who has lived—though but for a few months or so—on what Maud's lover recognised as kisses sweeter, sweeter than anything on earth; who has thought that other fellow horribly presumptuous for daring to touch that sacred glove—how shall such a man be able to endure offhand the news that someone else is to have the extended enjoyment of what was his monopoly?"

That is exactly what Fred did—endured it offhand. And the effort was creditable to him. "Lomax—Lomax—Lomax," said he, with an increasing strength on the first syllable, as though he knew several Highmaxes. "Didn't I meet him at your father's—a—one evening?" He did not feel equal to specifying the occasion. It was in the halcyon days at the outset of the engagement.

"I expect you did," said Nancy. "He's not a bad chap. Only he's rather pink, and looks as if he had been stretched."

"Do looks matter?" said Mrs. Carteret. And Fred felt grateful to her for speaking, for indeed he was a little at a loss what to say. Could he show pleasure? Could he show pique? Neither recommended itself. Could he say he had heard the gentleman very highly spoken of, when he had repeated over his name in that doubtful way? He couldn't very well do anything active. So he remained silent.

"Seems they don't!" said Nancy, answering Mrs. Carteret's question. "He's a Public Analyst, if that does you any good. It doesn't me! Good-night, dear!" But it was not in the nature of this girl to accept a broken-off trothplight as a thing to be dumb about, like a death, or one's stockings. She turned to Fred as she was leaving the room, and said—with dreadfully bad taste, the story admits: "Are you glad or sorry, Fred?"

He steered cleverly out of the cross-currents. "I wonder which!" said he. "You can say whichever you like, you

know." And then Nancy was gone, and he and his mother were at liberty to laugh over her individuality.

"I wish," said Mrs. Carteret, as a corollary to this incident, "that *you* had something to tell me about yourself, Fred. But I suppose we must wait for *that*." She spoke in a way which may have been invented by Nature to refer to projects of marriage, as the moment one hears it one knows what it is about. It is always about Hymen, proper; that deity never being otherwise, for that matter. But Fred had nothing to tell, in that connection; his own fatuous passion being hopeless by hypothesis, and not a thing to be talked about, even to his mother.

Besides, just as Mrs. Carteret was thinking of making this news of Cintra's a fulcrum on which to rest a lever of catechism about her son's own affairs, in comes the new parlour maid Jane with a missive on a salver, and an intimation that its source or origin is waiting for an answer. The answer had to be written, if the bearer could prolong his or her or its waiting for five minutes; so the opportunity was lost. And as its purport was that the writer hoped that the Rev. Mr. Somebody would come in to coffee at nine o'clock, and dinner was by this time imminent, no real chance of another came until after his reverend departure. It was near eleven o'clock before the mother and son could have communication to themselves.

Then the mother tried back for the last point of contact. "I suppose," she said, taking the maintenance of the topic in both their minds for granted, "that this Mr. Lomax . . . The name is Lomax, isn't it?"

"Yes—Lomax." Rather censoriously, as if a much better name would have been possible.

"I suppose this Mr. Lomax has a good official salary. What is he?"

"Something to do with Inspection of Factories, I fancy. He analyses pickles and preserves, and detects minute quantities of organic poisons. Oh yes—I should say he was good for a thousand a year. Quite."

"I wonder whether they'll be happy." Mrs. Carteret waited for a comment.

Fred felt he would have been glad to drag Providence in, and leave the decision in His hands. But it would have seemed unlike him, to his mother. So he let it alone, and said vaguely:—"You never can tell."

"I am glad at any rate, my dear boy, that you didn't rush away in a fit of pique and propose to the nearest pretty girl that

you thought would have you. That's what very often happens."

"Perhaps I did, and the nearest pretty girl wouldn't have anything to say to me."

"Perhaps. How can I tell?"

"I can tell, dear Mother mine. Nothing of the sort took place, nor of any sort. Cintra and I . . . Well!—we found it wouldn't work, and it would be wisest to stop it off! So we stopped it off. That's the story."

"I see. How very sensible and reasonable!" There may have been some equivalent of:—"If you are going to talk nonsense I may as well read"—in the way Mrs. Carteret took up a book and opened it nowhere in particular. That she had read none of it was clear enough from what she said two minutes later, as she closed it and laid it down. "Tell me the real story, dear Fred! Do you suppose I don't know that there is a real story? There *must* be!" Fred kept silence. "There may have been—somewhere—some time or other—two young people as prosaic and prudent as you make out you two were. But I'm sure *he* wasn't you, and *she* wasn't Cintra." Fred looked embarrassed, but still said nothing. She went on:—"Do you know, my dear—I think you *do* know, for I fancy I said something about it—I did suspect Cintra of . . . of some sort of unreasonable jealousy."

Fred kept the embarrassed look, but tried to laugh, not over-successfully. "I know what you are referring to," said he.

"Well, was that it?" Her eyes were watching the embarrassed look.

"It was—and it wasn't. I think the entire unreasonableness of it contributed to . . ."

"To what?" She waited.

"To my belief that we should never agree," said he at length. "You know, Mother dear, that it may be entirely untrue that a groundless fancy of this sort brought about—the result that we know of. But all the same it might have a very strong influence. It had—on me—the unreasonableness of it."

"But you *did* nothing—so I understand? The initiative was Cintra's?"

"Yes, it was, to all appearance. But how can I tell that she did not see into my mind? I admit that I was nettled at the suggestion that I . . . However, it's no use talking about it."

"Would it not be more use talking about it if we did not fight shy of the main point—did not speak plainer, in fact? Was

not the suggestion that nettled you that you admired Lucy Hinchliffe?"

Fred was very uncomfortable, and flushed. "The suggestion, was," said he, "that my admiration for Miss Hinchliffe—for Charley's wife, that is—which is one that is shared to the full by all her friends, was . . . was of a sort that . . ." He hung fire.

She finished for him. "That was incompatible with your sworn fidelity to herself. You stupid boy, why did you pay any attention to her? All girls behave like that. It only means that they want to be cosseted over a little."

"But suppose one doesn't feel like it?"

"I'm afraid that goes to the root of the matter. You mean, in short, that you didn't care for Cintra."

"You are very unjust, Mother dear! I *did* care for Cintra."

"Not enough, then!"

"Well—how much is enough?"

"No love that wavers *the least* is enough. Yours was not equal to the test that all girls have held to be their prerogative from the beginning of Time. If their lovers, when called on to swear that they are incomparable, hang fire, let them make no further pretence of love! You ought to have pledged yourself forthwith to Cintra's greater beauty—greater than Lucy Hinchliffe's—should have said crystal was muddy to so ripe a glow, and so forth. . . ."

"But it would have been romantic nonsense. It would have been—suppose we say?—inaccurate."

"Fred—Fred! It is inaccuracy of this sort a girl expects. An accurate lover had better pack up and go—unless indeed he is pretty sure that his idol has Helen's cheek but not her heart. Then he may claim mathematical accuracy. About the face, at least. Hearts don't matter so much."

"It seems to me," said Fred, "to come to the same thing in the end. Cintra and I only looked a fact in the face. You say she had a right to put my affection for her to this test. I daresay she had. I can't pretend to know what rights a girl has or hasn't. But I do know that she would have been expecting me to talk ridiculous nonsense if she had . . ."

"Had expected you to sing her praises like a real lover, when you were only a half-hearted one—is that it?" Mrs. Carteret had formed a false idea of the lines on which the lovers had fallen out—thought point-blank jealousy was responsible. Fred was inclined to encourage this idea, as one that kept the subject

safer for discussion. But he had used an unguarded phrase, and his mother went back on it for explanation. "I can't quite understand, though, why you say 'would have been expecting you.' Wasn't she? Expecting you to disclaim the admiration for this other young lady that she imputed to you, I mean?"

Fred assumed a secretive air. "It didn't work exactly that way," he said, speaking in a dry tone, which implied that further enquiry was not invited.

But mothers are not strangers, bound to take hints. Mrs. Carteret considered the position, while her son kept his lips ostentatiously closed. Presently she decided to say:—"I think you had better tell me exactly what did happen."

Now that Cintra's third finger was definitely destined to wear a wedding ring placed on it by another man, even though he was a pink widower with four children who looked as if he had been stretched, no engineering of a reconciliation would be possible, say what Fred might. So it was safe for him to say after a pause:—"Perhaps you're right." He then went on to explain that the cause of the rupture of relations had really been Cintra's absolute refusal to go on with the scheme of The Cedars; or rather the ground on which she placed this refusal—that of a perfectly unreasonable and violent antipathy to the lady who was affianced to his oldest and dearest friend, and whom she had barely seen. It was a good while back now, he said—a year and a half, wasn't it?—but his mother must remember that Cintra and Miss Hinchliffe, now Mrs. Snaith, had scarcely spoken on that Sunday when they came to lunch, and they had never met since. And it was Cintra's doing, not Lucy's. At least, Cintra might have waited for complete acquaintance.

"H'm!" said Mrs. Carteret. "I *thought* it was then."

"Thought what was then?"

"My dear—the *casus belli*! If you hadn't been such a goose. . . ."

"Why was I a goose?"

"Well—if you could have contrived a little . . . a little politic concealment of your admiration for Mistress Lucy . . ."

"I say, Mother, come now!"

"Don't be in a rage, dear boy! I know it was all quite right and perfectly harmless. But if you had had the common sense to exercise a little self-repression—to bottle up, in fact—all might have been well!"

"Which is 'well'?" I am not dissatisfied with things as they are."

"Then there is no more to be said on the matter. I hope Cintra is equally satisfied."

"I hope so. Why shouldn't she be? It was her choice, you know—none of mine!"

If Mrs. Carteret had expressed the thought that was in her mind—that jealousy is one of the signs of love—Fred would have felt very uncomfortable. Perhaps it was to spare him self-questionings that she held her tongue. And, after all, consider that Analytical Chemist! To what end should she supply Fred with food for regrets? Even if her son had not been so philosophical over it, Destiny could not hark back now. So she merely said:—"I think I might have felt as Cintra did about the housekeeping. Plans of that sort seldom work well. Of course if the house had been halved, that would have made a difference."

"Would it?"

"Well—wouldn't it?"

"I should say *not*. I don't think Cintra would have objected to the house scheme if Miss Hinchliffe's . . . personality had been different."

"If she hadn't been so pretty—is that it?"

"Something of that sort. I think it is just possible that she had formed a false image of the girl Charley Snaith was engaged to—bony sort of female with fangs, or else a pudding one with little eyes. . . ."

"Neither description would apply to Miss Hinchliffe," said Mrs. Carteret by the way, but not as though she expected assent or dissent.

Fred continued:—"And it made her a little premature. She and El . . . she and her sister had, I suppose, made up their minds to a Mr. and Mrs. Charley in keeping—as the artists say—with their interpretation of Charley himself. Of course I know what *that* was."

"I'm sure that Elbows—as you all but called her—never said a word against Miss Hinchliffe, and would have backed up the double housekeeping to any extent. She's a dear girl, Nancy. In fact, the dearest of girls; but the moment beauty comes into question, she becomes simply abject, and grovels. She got quite idiotic over Miss Hinchliffe."

"Isn't she equally idiotic over Mrs. Charles Snaith?"

Mrs. Carteret gave a little thought to this, then said, as one who decides a well-weighed consideration:—"Perhaps not just lately. At least, she sticks to the beauty, but has rather given

in on the point of its owner's . . . well!—perfection. You see, she imputes angelic qualities to the owners of beautiful faces. And then she gets disappointed when she finds they are human."

To take an interest in what Nancy thought, was *infra dig*: Fred judged it advisable to infuse a certain amount of loftiness—a disguise of curiosity, in fact—into his enquiry:—"And what is the evidence of humanity Miss Nancy Fraser has discovered in this particular case?"

"You needn't be so scornful, Fred dear! I think it's probably all nonsense. Did *you* know that your friend Charles Snaith was next of kin to an earldom?"

Fred laughed out. "No—that indeed I didn't, and don't. But if anybody has said so, I know what it comes from." He gave a very brief and imperfect account of his friend's aristocratic connections, pooh-poohing the idea that Charley could ever, short of a miracle, enjoy the satisfactions, or undergo the miseries, of wearing a coronet. "Kill half the family," said he, "and of course Charley would have a chance. But there's an heir, fast enough, when the venerable head of the family departs this life. He'll be a centenarian before that happens, if he doesn't look sharp. And what's more the heir's just married. I can't be certain, but my recollection is rather emphatic, that Charley told me he was married—just lately."

"I don't think it's all nonsense—not quite all. What is the heir's name? Lord Something he's got to be."

"It's a name I always forget. Honeyguts, I think."

"Nonsense, Fred! It's much more like Chitterling."

"I don't consider Honeyguts a bad shot for Chitterling," said Fred, perversely. "But what about him, whichever he is?"

"Lord Chitterling, who is seventy-four, is just married certainly. But he's not expected to live." Further, it appeared that this marriage, solemnised by the bridegroom on what was probably his deathbed, was a ceremonial that ought to have taken place many years ago, in which case the earldom would have been well provided with heirs, who were now in danger of being twitted with their illegitimacy by a babe as yet unborn; which, if it turned out male, would inherit a rent-roll in two or three shires, while they and their sisters would have to live on the borders of Society, in the enjoyment of modest competences.

Fred's curiosity at this point forced him to climb down from his lofty superiority to Nancy's views. "Yes," said he, when his mother had ended, "but what I want to get at is—what

has Mrs. Charles got to do with this? Why does El . . . why does Miss Fraser connect her with it, I mean?"

"Only in this way. . . . It's very absurd, you know. At least, I think it's absurd."

"I've no doubt I shall, too. Cut along! How does Mrs. Charley come in? That's the point."

Mrs. Carteret seemed to find her explanation more difficult than she had anticipated. "You must look at this, you know, by the light of Nancy's absurd antipathy to Mr. Snaith's nose. You may laugh, Fred, but I'm sure that's it."

"Just as like as not!" said Fred. "But you haven't told me what it is I'm too look at."

"Well—I suppose I must. But I'm almost sorry now I began about it. It seems so foolish."

"Get on. Fire away!"

"The girl has got it into her crazy pate that Mrs. Charles Snaith doesn't care a straw for her husband, and only married him on the chance of . . . Well—you see!" The lady spoke these words with a blind faith in the Rectitudes as developed in her own flesh and blood. They could not affect her son. A worser, more astute woman would at least have looked at his face to see how he took them.

As it was, she did not even notice the uneasiness of his contemptuous laugh. "That's what Elbows thinks," said he, not hesitating over the disparaging nickname this time. "Elbows had better shut up." His mother accepted this as a dismissal of a subject too absurd for discussion. But his disquiet would not let him leave it. After a moment or two he said—but equably enough:—"I wonder what put that rot into the young woman's head."

"Of course it isn't only Mr. Snaith's nose. I wasn't quite in earnest about that." So Fred had understood. His mother continued:—"Nancy has picked up the idea from her visits at The Cedars. You know she visits her friend there?"

Fred had not met her there, he said. But he was there chiefly in the evenings and early mornings, and would be almost sure to miss her. He seemed a little puzzled that Mrs. Charley should not have referred to these visits, but his mother accounted for the phenomenon. "You don't hide your dislikes, my dear boy! You shouldn't be so transparent. Mrs. Charley knows you hate Nancy, and call her Elbows."

"I call her Elbows," said Fred, "because Charley nicknamed her Elbows the same evening we made her acquaintance." He

was conscious that Memory felt raw over the revival of this event and fidgeted under it, dismissing it curtly as "Mother Ladbroke Square's Loo." He disclaimed personal dislike of Nancy, but disallowed her as unimportant. What did it matter what impressions so insignificant a character formed of—of anything or anybody? He would have taken anyone but his mother to task for treating the mutual affection of his married friends as a legitimate subject of discussion. As it was, the case was fully met by his repeating:—"Elbows had better shut up."

"You mustn't run away with the idea, Fred," said Mrs. Carteret, "that I endorse what the child says in any way. Because she is a child, though she's twenty-three. It's the sort of idea young women get from works of fiction. Thank Heaven!—one never meets the people in novels in real life."

If ever woman was unconscious of the effect of her words, it was this lady, during this conversation. When her son changed the subject abruptly, she set his doing so down to a mere wish to make short work of a thesis too ridiculous for discussion, plus an unwillingness on his part to be severe on her informant, in consideration of the affection he knew to subsist between them. For he jumped quite suddenly from this personal conversation to his Anti-Vibration Engine. He had just finished his full specification of the patent and a friend was going to introduce it to a man whose hobby was new inventions, and who had the rare qualification of being able to put down ten thousand pounds as easily as not. It wouldn't take long to construct—and then . . . Well—then let Vibration look out! His hearer congratulated him warmly, as she had congratulated him on a score of similar great successes before. Then they saw that it was near midnight, and went upstairs to bed.

Mrs. Carteret turned on the first landing to say to her son:—"Fred dear, you mustn't let what I told you that dear silly child said make you uncomfortable. It's all nonsense together." In reply to which Fred laughed outright. "Oh—you mean Elbows's rot. Yes—I should rather think it was," and went away to his room whistling nonchalance in support of his declaration.

But his night was not to be a restful one. How shall a young man be at rest every drop of whose blood has been insidiously poisoned by a delirious longing for a woman out of his reach, when his only salvation against himself is the knowledge that she cannot be won without an act of treachery from which he recoils heart and soul? And how shall that salvation keep its

power over him, when a creeping doubt is constantly growing, growing, in his mind that that act of treachery is already committed? For if there is a particle of truth in this foolish story of that confounded girl—devil take her!—who can say that estrangement, assuming it to exist, is due to such an idiotic cause as Property missing the right pocket, *videlicet* our own; an elusive Title inherited by someone else? Much more likely, said Fred's innermost thoughts among themselves, much more likely than *that*, that a spark from the fire on this side of the hedge should have set a heart smouldering on the other side. But then—how about Charley?

In the darkness of the night and the loneliness, Fred felt towards his mother the nearest feeling of anger or resentment against her of which he was capable. What possessed her to pass on to him that idiot girl's suggestion that Charles and Lucy were less than *innamorati*? Why cut him adrift from his only anchorage, his faith in their affection which made his own passion a mere aimless madness? A torment—yes! But a torment to be concealed and buried with him, an unsuspected disease that might have his death to answer for. How could he tell?

Anyhow, why need mothers think their sons superhuman?

CHAPTER XXI

It must not be supposed that Mr. and Mrs. Klem, or Grewbeer more properly, allowed the extraordinary disappearance of Dr. Carteret to be forgotten. In fact, as time went on, they became more than ever alive to his non-reappearance; and the subject became a *pièce de résistance*, which appeared capable of indefinite examination. Indeed, there did not seem to be any reason why it should ever be exhausted, seeing that one element of its vitality was a curious property it had of presenting itself as *à propos* of everything else.

Thus the handy young man whom the story has seen making himself useful on a door-lock at The Cedars, and who owed opportunities for extending his connection to its ex-caretakers, said to them on the occasion of his suppression of a partik'lar bad gas-escape, owin' to rats, at the empty house which was the object of their solicitude at present:—"Speakin' of what rats is capable in the way of biting through lead pipin', Mr. Grewbeer, you never heard no more, I suppose, of that old cove that varnished?" By which this young man, whose name was Ham-brose, or was pronounced so, no more meant that he knew any of Dr. Carteret's relations with rats, than that the Doctor practised varnishing, or any trade. The one was a convention—an easy channel to conduct the stream of discourse through—the other an overstress on a syllable, to indicate perhaps a misgiving that the word might be of foreign origin, and ought to be handled with caution.

Mr. Grewbeer accepted the convention, and showed a sympathetic mistrust of the word. "Varnished!" said he. "It ain't for the likes of we to say gentlefolks has varnished, not of their own accord. But I'll give you this much, young man, that I've heerd tell no more of him from that day to this. Nor I don't believe anyone else has."

"That's what they said in the noospapers. 'Cos I read 'em every Sunday morning. *Sunday Times* and the *Pink 'Un*. Rev. Doctor Cartearret. Same story in both of 'em. Looks as if they'd got something to go by."

"That's no account. That's on'y how they backs each other up." He added a remark to the effect that a blood-stained liar

was a blood-stained liar wherever you met him. This seemed merely the expression of an abstract truth, not a special indictment of the Sunday Press. "But you've got the name wrong, so I don't think much of *your* noospapers."

"Cartearet's right."

"Cartearet's wrong. You can tell your noospaper boy the name's Carter, Ret. And he may just go home and tell his guv'nor I said so, and I know. Why, there's my missus!—she'll tell you the same. Warn't she sent for to the house for to recall partic'lars of the sarcumstances, by the parties that bought the premises and paid for 'em, square?" Mr. Grewbeer seemed to think this honourable discharge of a business obligation reinforced his pronounciation of the name under discussion. He shouted at the old woman to testify to the accuracy of his report, especially as to one of its phrases:—"Sent for you was, Alison, for to recall partic'lars of the sarcumstances attendin' the Rev. Drury Carter Ret, on the occasion of his bein' showed over these here premises September twelvemonth. That's what the letter said—so just you up and speak the truth." Which being confirmed by the woman—after repetition shouted; for of course she had not heard a word—her husband subsided, growling:—"There—what did I tell you? You might just as easy have said so the first go-off!" For he was always censorious of his wife's deafness, which certainly exceeded his own, though acknowledging its advantages sometimes, as leaving his choice of language a greater latitude. "She don't ketch expressions I happen to use" was his way of putting it.

The handy young man, Hambrose, being as it were free of the subject, went nearer to the old woman, and shouted:—"Wrote you a letter, the party did as took the house—was that the game?"

Mrs. Grewbeer assented, with a reservation. "You might call it a letter," she said. "Only mind ye, it was three-cornered."

"I've seen *them*," said Hambrose. "Ladylike sort of a letter. But it's again the Regulations to send them by post. I reckon it's because there ain't no square corners for the stamp."

Mr. Grewbeer contradicted this. "Anythin' you can shove in at the Post Office'll go, if you come to that. Tork of goin'! Only the P'int is—will they deliver it? Not they, except it's properly stamped. Wot they gain, by stickin' out for a hextry charge, Goard only knows! If they git it, all right!—then I don't say nothin'. But if they *don't* git it, where the use is of

carrin' of the letter back is what disagrees with my stum-mick."

This side-issue was disposed of by his wife. "There wasn't no postman, nor yet any stamp," said she. "It come by hand. Cox's Caroline, that takes in The Cedar's washing, she kep' it in her dress pocket for next time she come this way. And it wasn't so very long, in the manner of speaking." Caretakers have a fine perception of the irrelevant, and make a point of supplying it in conversation.

"And then you see the lady at the premises?"

"Because I went there by appointment. I see the lady. 'Ansum she is, enough to make you call out. Only I reckonised I'd seen her before. She come to the house when we had charge, with the gentleman, in a carriage. He was one of them two that come more than once. I understood they was going to be married."

"I never heerd 'em say nothin' o' that." Mr. Grewbeer, on the watch to contradict his wife, or anyone, jumped at the chance of throwing doubt on anything she said, even by merely negative testimony.

"Lard, Grewbeer!" was the old woman's comment when she heard and understood his words, shouted and re-shouted. "Who do you think was going to be sayin' this and sayin' that, to the likes of us, when it was no concern of ours? But I took it they was sweet, by the ways of 'em. . . . Well—they was keeping company, anyway you put it. One don't want to be told everything. One has a pair of heyes, when all's said."

"What's the name of this here one?"

"It's wrote at the end of the letter. I giv' it you to read. A name with a hen and a hess in it. Oh. . . . Snaith!—in course, it was Snaith."

"That ain't the name of the parties that bought the house. Much more like Pinchquitch, or Splitchwink—some such a name."

"Garn, Grewbeer, ye old silly! It was this lady's mother bought the premises, for her and her husband to orkupy. So that name what you choose to call her by was her maiden name. I heerd her say it, explainin' to me how she come to send Cox's Caroline with a three-cornered letter. Says she to me, she says:—'Before I married Mr. Snaith, you know, my name was . . .'" But Mrs. Grewbeer could not supply the name, and had to stop. She made a trial, but could get no nearer than *Fleshwinch*; an improbable name outside a dream about

the rack. Her husband seemed to think he had been much nearer the mark, saying:—"Well—Splitchwink I stands by. Suppose we let it go at that!"

Now, none of this discussion had any relation to the handy young man Hambrose's interest in the topic of Mrs. Grewbeer's visit to The Cedars, which was to arrive, tortuously if a direct approach was impossible, at something on which he could hinge a recommendation of his own deftness to the tenants thereof. He therefore endeavoured to bring back the discussion from the onomatologies into which it had strayed, by saying:—"This here lady who sent for you, marm, she warn't enquirin', by any chance, for a young man who could turn his hand to most anything you could put a name to—plumbin', carpenterin' and jinin', fittin', gardenin', wood-choppin', tendin' on a 'oarse? Or could drive a motor if required." Motors, about this time, were beginning to make themselves felt; but their owners had not begun to disbelieve in professions of chauffeurship by young men whose only qualification was a pair of dirty hands.

Mrs. Grewbeer met this suggestion with a Universal Negative, to which the dry and perfunctory formula of the Logicians was passionless milk-and-water. The lady, she said, didn't want no young man for to do nothing for her, being already provided with a rare plenty of specialists in each department. Moreover, The Cedars was unlike other houses in one respect, that it never stood in want of any repairs at all, owing to the unblemished reputation of the builders who had carried out the alterations.

At this point Mr. Grewbeer became impatient of the way in which the thread of the conversation got lost. "There's no holdin' females to the p'int," said he. "They gets wornderin' off after this, and wornderin' off after that, till it'd take a lawyer to say which end you was uppermost. . . . What *was* the p'int? Why—the p'int was, what did this here lady send for parties two mile off to talk to her for, as if she was the Hemperor of China?" The selection of this monarch, a typical autocrat, implied that the action of this lady had been arbitrary, and overbearing.

"She giv' me plenty to eat, anyhow, Grewbeer. Or told 'em to it, in the kitchen, which is all one. Likewise a cup of tea and a half a crown—two cup o' tea I should say—and bread-and-butter. So *you* ain't got nothin' to complain of!"

"What did she want to be torkin' to you at all for?" He went on, under his breath, to indicate the universal practice of womankind:—"Torkin'—torkin'—torkin'. Always torkin'.

Nothing but tork, all day long! What had she got to say for herself, missus? That's the p'int."

Thus exhorted, the old woman concentrated on a report of what had actually happened. The young lady of The Cedars had not behaved like the Emperor of China, but had, on the contrary—though this was by implication, no European having a right to speak positively of the conduct of that potentate under such very hypothetical circumstances—asked Mrs. Grewbeer to set down after her walk. An auxiliary cup of tea—without prejudice to later developments—had lubricated intercourse. Mrs. Snaith had wished to hear, all over again, the story of Dr. Carteret's visit and of his final disappearance; since which, as Mrs. Grewbeer knew, he had never been seen by mortal man, unless some mortal man was keeping testimony back. Mrs. Grewbeer had told that story, like she done afore, and not put nothin' in hextra for to fill out. Then Mrs. Snaith she asked, she did, comfortable-like, what really *was* Mrs. Grewbeer's idear about that young boy's 'istory how he never seen no one come out of the house. Whereupon Mrs. Grewbeer had replied, vaguely, that boys was boys, and where they come in there was no sayin'. Then Mrs. Snaith says, if Mr. Grewbeer was right—here that gentleman interposed to say that in course he was right; you might put your money on that, and not lose a tanner—this boy, being naturally a liar, had affirmed that he had seen no one come out of the house, which being naturally a lie, must be accepted as a direct proof that he *had* seen someone do so. This could only have been Dr. Carteret; ergo it *was* Dr. Carteret. Mr. Grewbeer interjected that any fool with half-a-head on his shoulders could see *that*. His wife went on to say that the young lady had again asked her, serious-like, what she really believed, herself. To which she had replied that it wasn't for the likes of her, at her time of life, to be believing and disbelieving things. Of which formula of evasion she seemed proud.

Then it appeared further that the young lady had requested Mrs. Grewbeer to repeat her story, or portions of it, on the actual scene of its enactment, taking her first to the foot of the large staircase, and making her say, partic'lar like, exactly which side of the stairs the Doctor come down. Then an eventless recital of his examination of sundry front rooms in the more modern part of the house; and finally the corner of the long passage where she left him, to answer the bell. She had given Mrs. Snaith full particulars of every word that he spoke, his last enquiry relating to the name of the former owner of the

house, the authority on Insanity, and inventor of many new forms of treatment, Dr. Aytcholt. And especially of how he had said to her:—"Hadn't you better answer your bell?" As if it mattered to a minute!

This version of the old woman's story has taken no account of sundry interruptions by her husband, he having heard the whole of it before more than once, and being very anxious to catch his wife contradicting herself. Their only importance is due to the fact that every effort he made in that direction turned out a failure. Which looks as if she were a trustworthy witness.

"But, my word!" said she in conclusion, chiefly to impress the handy young man. "You should see the beautiful place they've made of it! What with hamphilopsisses in tubs and cherokeets in cages, that long passage leadin' up to the green'us is, you might say, 'Eaven itself." The story has not the dimmest idea what Mrs. Grewbeer's botanical name was founded on, but supposes Cherubin and Cherokee Indians to be equally responsible for the name she gave Mrs. Snaith's parrakeets.

The handy young man professed some interest, but a perfunctory one, in the changes at The Cedars which his handiness had had no share in. He had, in fact—now that professional advancement had waned—only been waiting till a full stop to the narrative should make an opening for his departure. He responded, however, civilly, to Mrs. Grewbeer's excursion into Botany and Ornithology, saying:—"You can't never say what these here toffs won't do with their money." He then remembered that he was doo on a job, and took his leave.

The old couple remained silent for awhile. Then Mr. Grewbeer, who had been casting about in his mind for a censure to pronounce on his wife, appeared to find one. "Whor d'yer want to be setting that young jackanapes a torking about what ain't no concern of his'n?" said he.

This caused more than one interrogatory "Hay?" from the old woman. But explanation reached her mind in the end, and she replied:—"It's every bit as much his concern as it is yours or mine. Likewise, I kep' back."

"What was it you kep' back?"

"Nothin' much when you come a think on it. Only a idear'd got hold of the young lady."

"You never told me nothin' about no idear."

"Nor yet I don't know that I shall." There is no greater satisfaction than that of whetting curiosity, especially when one

has something to conceal. When the reverse is the case, a sense of insecurity vitiates a complete enjoyment of the position.

Mr. Grewbeer affected indifference. That is the safest attitude to assume, but it requires a consummate actor. His "You can soote yourself" was good as far as it went. But an impassive negative demeanour should have followed it. Active indifference, in any form, is a mistake. Even whistling or humming should be avoided. Instead of acting in harmony with these precepts, Mr. Grewbeer spoiled his case by suddenly exclaiming a moment or two later:—"As if I cared threepence for anyone's idears!" This is bowdlerised, he having qualified the sum he specified as one that a cut finger might have handled. A discreet silence would have been better, and he certainly should not have snapped his fingers.

"Lard, Benjamin!" said the old woman. "'Ark at your language! As if I wasn't a tellin' of yer!" She then proceeded to take him into her confidence, describing how, when she had again gone over full particulars of Dr. Carteret's deportment at the entrance to the long passage, her hostess had took on a kind of skeery look—only she kep' 'andsome all along—and walked her all down the passage right to the end, saying ne'er a word. Here the narrator paused.

"And what come of it all?" said her husband. "I don't see nothing in any of that."

"Don't you 'urry me, Benjamin! I can't abide to be drove. So soon as ever she got me clost up to the green'us door, round she turns and points all down the passage, towards the house. Then she says:—'Was he where we should see him now?' she says. 'Yes,' I says, 'just as in the hangle of the wall, 'andling his comforter, 'cos for the chill of the evening.' So then she says:—'With his back to us now?' she says. And I says:—'Yes,' I says, 'only then there warn't nobody behind his back.' Then she says:—'In course,' she says, 'me and my husband *was* behind the other old gentleman's.' Says I:—'What old gentleman's?' The speaker's delivery of this laid claim to an almost convulsive accuracy, and made the hearer aware that close attention was expected of him.

"Who was the party spoke of?" said he. "There warn't any other old gentleman."

"There's where it was, Grewbeer. There warn't any other old gentleman. Only, the lady she sticks to it there was."

"Who did she put him down for to be? Summun or other, she must have took him for!"

"Just what I made bold to say to her. And she turns round to me quite unconsciouslike, and says 'Why, in coorse,' she says, 'he was with the other parties goin' over the premises.' So I giv' my assurance there was no sich, that day. Or if there was, I'd never let 'em in. Nor yet my old man; or if he'd 'a done so, I couldn't have been off seein' of 'em—let alone voices in an empty house, soundin' all over the place." The old woman stopped and waited for her husband's comment.

It came after visible retrospection. "No one come anigh the house that day," said he, very decisively. "I'd 'a seen 'em if they had. On a Sunday it was them two came, in a brougham. I was bound to be at home all day." This did not refer to any bond or treaty. It only meant that Mr. Grewbeer's anchorage in port on Sundays was a very binding one. The story has seen something of the way he spent Saturday, and feels no surprise.

"Just the very selfsame words I said to the lady. My husband was bound, I says, to be at home that day you come, bein' it was Sunday, and he'll know, seein' he takes account of all parties as come to see the premises; though, as may 'eppen, he don't show 'em over." Mrs. Grewbeer's reference to Sunday seemed to point vaguely to some obligation her husband was under to—suppose we say?—the Archbishop of Canterbury. No doubt Mrs. Snaith had accepted it as conferring a halo of respectability, without close analysis of it.

Mr. Grewbeer wanted to know what followed, but he did not want to compromise his dignity by asking for it. He chose a middle course. "It's time I was at the Six Bells," said he, "for to meet a party by the name of Jennins I promised to. So you better look alive afore I'm off. This here lady, what did she say upon that? You said no one else was about the house—warn't it?"

"I said no one else was about the house, barring you and me and him and her, nor yet hadn't been all day. Then she says:—'Are you sure?' says she. 'Safe sure,' says I. 'Then all I can say is it's mighty queer!' says she. And she gits a so't of hagitated look as if took with a flurry. 'I wish I knew what to make of it,' she says. Then, to pour hile over her, as you might say, I says I was mistook, and some party had got in by a mistake."

"I shouldn't 'a thought you'd 'a had the sense to it," said the old man, growling to himself. Then audibly:—"In coorse it

was just heyesight and nothing else, and she never saw no party at all. . . . Time I was off!"

"You come back from them Bells time enough for your supper, Benjamin. And not the worse!" To which the old reprobate answered, briefly:—"You mind your own consarns!" His wife turned her attention to cooking the supper, repeating to herself:—"Jennins—Jennins—Jennins! He don't know nobody by the name of Jennins. Nor yet he ain't likely to, that I can see! But his 'eart's good, that's one comfort."

Mrs. Grewbeer had a touching faith in the intrinsic excellence of her husband. His material and audible manifestations were those of a selfish and dissolute old man, but she had a mysterious insight into his inner soul, and saw that it was good, in some unexplored hinterland of entity. She called it his Heart, but that was mere metaphor.

This short intrusion into domestic life was made by the story to obtain at first hand Mrs. Grewbeer's report of her interview with young Mrs. Snaith; who, as it appears, had availed herself of the means of communication supplied by the Wash, to procure this interview, after deciding that it would be most fruitful of result if the old woman's recollection of Dr. Carteret's last appearance to human eyes was repeated to her on the spot of its actual occurrence. It is interesting to notice how the character—almost—of an Abstraction which the Wash presents to its clients vanishes when seen from the point of view of its own circle. So much depends on which side we see things from. In the eyes of Mrs. Grewbeer the Wash was Cox's Caroline, and the mission entrusted to her as an agency had been fulfilled by her—according to Mr. Grewbeer—as a Young Slut. He had added his belief that it warn't difficult to foretell the destiny of that Slut.

As it chanced, no one but Mrs. Charles Snaith herself was in the house—except of course sundry domestics—when Mrs. Grewbeer answered this summons; so there was no one to notice the effect the interview had upon her. It was, however, probably responsible for a taciturnity of which her husband complained next day, at lunch with Fred Carteret at the restaurant they affected at this time in Holborn. "Luce has got the blues," was his reply to an enquiry from his friend as soon as instructions to the waiter were ended. "Hadn't half-a-word to throw at her devoted husband all last night, except to blow him up because the new door wasn't put in hand. Can't you stimulate the building miscreant, dear boy? . . . What's that!"

Fred's wits had wool-gathered for a moment. He produced the crop. "A . . . it wasn't applicable—what I was going to say," said he. "Sort of plausibility about it, though!"

"What were you going to say?"

"That the mills of God ground slowly, but they ground exceeding small."

"And the plausibility? Explain."

"Well—the idea was that Simcoxes took a jolly long time to find an old mahogany door, but it would be sure to be a beauty in the end."

"Don't see the connection of ideas. Suppose we chuck metaphor. . . . All right—whitebait for both!" The waiter had come back to say the whitebait was still on draught.

Fred threw away the wool-crop. "By all means chuck metaphor. What I mean is, where's the sense of starting the job till we've got the door? The only consequence would be that a perfect door, just too large or too small, would turn up a day too late. That would happen equally whatever size we made the framing. Whereas, if we start from the door, we shall get round Fate—spoil her fun. I really believe Destiny gets more gratification for her naturally spiteful disposition . . ."

"Shut up, and help yourself to whitebait. . . . No, really, when are they going to fix up that door?"

"They won't be long now. Next week they are doing some alterations at a jolly old house in St. Anne's Gate, and they'll have a splendid old door on their hands—a ripper! Panelling to make your mouth water!"

"Well—of course we had better have a nice door than a nasty one. But hurry 'em up—that's a dear boy! Of course it's a little queer of Luce to get such a fancy over that passage. . . . Oh no—I'm making every allowance for nerves and health and that sort of thing. . . . But what I look at is that there's nothing underneath it; no backbone exactly." Charles was brought up short by fear of giving pain.

It was needless. Fred was not afraid of the subject. "You mean," he said, "that the mere accident of my uncle having been seen on the spot, just before he started for Wimbledon, hardly—hardly *individualises* the place enough to justify . . . creepiness about it? You see what I mean?"

"Perfectly. That exactly puts the case. . . . You haven't got enough lemon. The idiots always chop the lemon up too small, and one squeezes it over one's fingers and none goes on the fish. . . . But it's impossible to reason about nerves. If

your mother got what they call a *scunner*, in the north, over your garden gate, because he went out at it, I shouldn't understand it myself. But I shouldn't feel the least surprise."

"You know, Charley, my dear mother isn't exactly . . . logical over it. I told you about the dream?"

Charley said absently:—"Yes—you told me about the dream," and Fred classed his absence as a form of assent to the laxity of logic ascribed to Mrs. Carteret. He was wrong, however; for Charley said—after an exhortation to him to help to finish the whitebait:—"I'm not so sure though about the logic."

"She admits that it *was* a dream, you know," Fred advanced doubtfully.

"When did she dream it? That seems to me to be the point."

"Immediately after. I mean on the Saturday night—morning of Sunday."

"When did she tell you of it?" Fred had to think this over. For remember—at the time of this conversation its topic was no affair of yesterday. A year and a half had passed. "I see," Charles continued, "that it wasn't next day, or you would say so."

"No—it wasn't next day, but later. It was after . . . after I last saw Cintra Fraser. I remember that, because I recollect not knowing anything about it . . . somewhere about that time."

"Don't understand. How does one recollect not knowing anything about a thing?"

"Well—one does! You and your legal mind! You want everything cut and dried to order. No really, old chap, I'm in earnest. I quite distinctly remember that when I was enquiring about the man that was drowned at Flinders's Mill, I knew nothing whatever about my mother's dream. And that was the morning after Miss Cintra Fraser and your humble servant decided to . . ."

"To cancel articles of partnership. All right about the dates. Well—it makes all the difference. I was disposed to defend your mother's position about the dream; but if she didn't mention the thing at the time, of course the incident loses force."

"All the same, she's quite convinced herself. Only I don't know that she expects everyone else to be."

"Not like my missus. . . . What are you having? Cold chicken? No—I won't have cold chicken. . . . Hot roast lamb, James. . . ." Having disposed of the waiter, Mr.

Charley went back to the previous question, but got no farther than:—"She expects everyone else . . ." and stopped.

"What does she expect everyone else to be convinced of?"

"Lucy? Oh, Lucy expects me to believe she sees an Archbishop strutting about the house. Of course one knows what *he* comes from."

"No. What?"

Charley felt somewhat disconcerted at Fred not taking his "of course" as obvious, because he did not want this reference to Dr. Carteret's last appearance to top the conversation. The subject was painful. So he sought for some way of explaining his meaning without direct reference to it. "Well!" he said. "You know she got at the old woman that was in the house at the time?"

"Mrs. Klem. I know."

"She made her repeat the whole story again. And now it's got on her nerves, and she has all sorts of fancies."

"Well—but—what?"

"Sheer nonsense—not worth repeating." Charley dismissed the subject, and manifestly intended to talk of something else, as soon as he had selected a topic. But his pause gave the dismissed subject a chance to recrudescence. "P'raps though I may as well tell you," said he. "Don't see that it makes any difference!" He then went on to tell how that Mrs. Klem's repetition of her testimony had produced so powerful an effect upon her hearer that the latter had contrived to see, on the very spot where Dr. Carteret had been seen, an elderly clerical gentleman who turned and walked away down the passage; an evident result, according to the narrator, of Mrs. Grewbeer's conviction that the Doctor must *have* got out of the house through the greenhouse, as there was no other way out except the front door, which investigation had already disposed of. Also how that the palpably hallucinate character of all this was as good as proved by the close resemblance of this clerical gentleman to a person who had been inspecting the premises when he and his wife—then his *fiancée*—had first visited them. She had, of course, never seen Dr. Carteret, and this chap, being some similar sort of person, had evidently got mixed up with him.

"What sort of looking chap was he?" interposed Fred at this point. "Perhaps he was like my uncle? Same size, anyhow!"

"What size was your uncle? Big man, as I recollect him at school."

"Very big. Weighed twenty stone."

"So I thought. I hadn't seen him since those days, and thought he might have fined down a bit."

"Oh dear no! The other way, if anything."

"Well—that settles the matter. You see, this man was very big, and happened to be a parson, as it chanced. Most likely Luce had seen a photograph of the Doctor. Anyhow, she's cooked up an image of him. It began with that chap though. I recollect her describing him."

Fred must have had misgivings as to how far selection of facts to be guided by was legitimate, even when they related to "phenomena"; for he said:—"But I say, Charley, let's be fair to the caretakers. Remember that both deny anyone else was in the house at the time."

"Don't think much of their testimony!" said Charley, easily. In which he was only following a time-honoured usage—that of rejecting all witnesses but those who testify to the truth of what we want. "Anyhow, old chap, do make them look alive with that door." And then they talked about something else.

Fred fought shy, for some reason he could not define, of trying for first-hand information about Mrs. Charley's interview with Mrs. Klem, and the eerie fancies her husband imputed to her. Perhaps it was that it was impossible to approach the subject otherwise than seriously; and to do this without seeming to attach too much importance to a mere hallucination was just as impossible, or more so. If he could have brought the incident into line with any accredited ghost story it would have been easier to contemplate it as matter for discussion; but how could he refer to such a phantasy otherwise than jocularly? Consider dignity! Are we not all committed to derision of suchlike legends—when men? Women are at liberty to discuss them seriously. But in what spirit of enquiry could Fred approach this one? As matter for derision; a good joke? Surely not!—for, consider his uncle's memory. Seriously, then?—with the seriousness that memory demanded? Perfectly ridiculous!

So he held his tongue, and the mahogany door, which appeared before midsummer, was generally accepted as an outcrop of the higher æsthetic; a decorative aftermath of the embellishments of the mansion. Its connection with the nervous fancies of that mansion's beautiful mistress was known only to her husband and his friend.

It was to all appearance complete and in its place on a Wednesday. To the unprofessional eye nothing was left to be

done. A higher discrimination on the part of the foreman on the job perceived that he and his confederates could "make a finish" by Saturday. This expression has two meanings; one, that a spirited effort—with perhaps a trifle of overtime—may end the job on that day; the other, that a leisurely attitude, as of lotus-eaters, may expand or dilute that job in such a manner as to deceive the unprofessional eye, and make its owner submit with a good grace to a charge of a week's wage for a day's work. In the present case those tiresome workmen had only just got out of the house when its master returned, accompanied by Fred Carteret as usual. They went straight to the contemplation of their result.

"Not half bad that, Fred," said Charley, who had been showing some tendency towards an æsthetic *raison-d'être* for this door. The original impulse to construct it had served its turn, and might be discarded as a concession to Neurosis of which one might be half ashamed, but which deserved forgiveness. "Let's see how it looks open." Of course the way out, when the door stood open, was like any other exit. But it was a satisfaction, for all that, to put it through its paces, as it were. The two young men passed into the lobby, crossed it, and stood looking out into the garden, now in the fullest glory of a summer evening. The days were just passing through the short period when the redundancy of new foliage on every tree cancels the memory of its winter; and in the suburbs of the great black town scores a new triumph over the sooty atmosphere we thought had this year slain branches and trunk outright. The sun had passed off half the lawn and rose-beds, and stood pledged not to return till to-morrow's dawn, leaving Tom the gardener free to squirt over them to his heart's content, and fill the air with an assurance that "God's in His Heaven, all's right with the World." A thought one is happy over, until some other bouquet reminds us where the Devil is.

"I must get Tom a bigger lawn-mower," said the master of the house. "He can't keep the grass down with the one he's got."

"You won't save power by increasing the size of the machine," replied the engineer.

"No—but if he harnesses his son in front of a bigger one he'll cut twice as quick. . . . I say, Fred!"

"What say, old chap?"

"I was thinking how jolly different the place looks from when we came here first—me and the missus, I mean." This was an

attempt to dissociate the place, as far as might be, from the cloud that hung over it. But it did not succeed.

"Very unlike what my uncle saw," said Fred, gravely. There was no getting away from it.

Charley laid an affectionate, apologetic hand on his friend's shoulder. "I'm sorry, dear boy," said he. "Never mind!"

"My fault," said Fred. "I might have let it alone. The thing is as it is, and we can do nothing." A mere commonplace of fatalism this, and Fred knew it.

They said no more, but walked in silence to the far end of the lobby, incurring a sudden shrill censure from the parrakeets as they passed the big cage. They returned in silence, but stopped half-way, and the parrakeets reserved their opinion until it could be repeated as a broadside.

"You know what I think, Fred?" Charley was bent on consolation. "He'll come back, alive and well, and we shall see him here, I hope, in this very house—in this very place! I wonder will he remember coming here, and the old woman running away to open the door."

"But . . . !"

"Oh, I know—it seems impossible. But I'm only telling you my conviction. . . . There's Lucy." He shouted and whistled to her, but she either did not or would not hear him. She came slowly across the lawn to the house, absorbed in the roses she had gathered,—an image of beauty that merged in the beauty of the dying day or cancelled it, according to the preoccupation of the eye that saw her. Fred would have ignored his, only too gladly; but how ignore the pulsations of an unruly heart? Nothing left but pretence! It should succeed, if human force of will could make it do so. So said Fred to that unruly heart of his, and it seemed to mock at his resolution, cruelly.

She vanished into the house, through a door that opened on the lawn, that had been a window of the sitting-room before the alterations, and they retraced their steps to meet her. The parrakeets waited for their chance, firing their broadside of shrieks with unanimous discipline, and dropping the subject the moment the enemy was out of sight.

"Haven't we met before to-day? I suppose we haven't," was Lucy's languid response to her husband's remark on entering the sitting-room. "I never heard you go in the morning." She put out her countenance, cornerwise, within kissing distance. But she retained Fred's hand in her own while she did it.

"Thought I had better let you have your sleep out, dearest,"

said Charley, apologetically. "You see, Fred, it's like this. When I walk to the station, I have to clear out of the house at eight o'clock, to catch the train at half-past." He was entering into further particulars of the position, when his wife stopped him.

"It's all right, Charles dear. We understand that it's inevitable. Never mind about the alterations of the trains." Then she had time to finish saying good-evening to Fred, with the help of the hand she had left with him for the purpose.

It was the slightest of incidents, and passed in half the time it takes to write it.

"I sang out to you across the garden, and you didn't hear me," said Charley to his wife.

"You should have shouted louder," was the unconcerned reply. Then she asked—where was he when he shouted? But the question was addressed more to Fred than to him.

Fred's mind was a maze of inconsistencies, bred of the position. How reconcile a blind intoxication of unruly passion with indignation at its object's semi-neglect of her husband? Yet that describes the bias of his thoughts at this moment. *His* task was resolute concealment, *hers* to help his resolution by clear tokens of a love elsewhere. If she failed there, he was lost. Otherwise, his lot was a burden to him alone. Grant that it was a hell, none need know it but himself. But it was easiest borne when *she* had no suspicion of it. That hell was at its worst when its evil spirits muttered—had *she*?

Fred strove to accept the hand that remained in his, the eyes that rested unreservedly on his face, as the best negative to such questioning. "Where was he when he shouted?" he repeated. "Where were we, Charley? . . . Oh, I know! Just the other side of the little green birds."

"Half-way down the long passage, sweetheart," says Charley. "We went through the new door. To baptize it, don't you know?"

"I thought so."

"I thought you didn't see us. You said so."

"I said I didn't hear you. I *saw* you plain enough. And somebody with you. Who was it?"

Fred and Charley looked at each other, in doubt. Each shook his head as though to a spoken enquiry. No—they had been alone.

The lady looked incredulous. "But I *saw* someone," said she. "As plainly as I see you now."

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"There wasn't anybody," said Charley, in the tone of a man who is getting used to his wife's fancies. Then he looked at his watch, and became alive to the lapse of time. "I say, Luce," said he. "We shall keep dinner waiting again if we don't look sharp." So they went away to dress. But Mrs. Snaith went through one door, and her husband and his friend through the other, the one that led to the great staircase. Each of the men looked at the other, and the husband said:—"Rum that, too! With the new door and all! But let her alone. She'll come to rights." His eyes were open to this singular nervous fancy of hers, about the place, but closed to his own—and his friend's—danger.

CHAPTER XXII

MAMMA HINCHLIFFE—so called by her son-in-law—had been deposited by her barouche at The Cedars some half-hour since, and was accompanied by a friend, this time. She was thick-sown with jewellery when she appeared in the drawing-room, and majestic. The friend was another sort; but it was worth a great deal, that sort. Its value may only have been a third of what her late husband died worth, but that only showed what a superior sort *he* was. Her dress said, almost audibly:—"Never mind my dignified reserve. Only think of what I cost." And every one of her rings, restrained though it was, was worth quite a real person's banker's account.

Hers was not a full-blooded opulence, but one of a sort very recognisable by Society, which really knew. This lady had come to enjoy a full week-end—to spend Saturday evening and stop over Sunday. She did the former on the lines of one who wishes others to say next day what a very nice person that Mrs. So-and-so is! But the next morning she said to Mrs. Hinchliffe, visiting her after breakfast in her own room:—"Mr. Carteret is an old friend of your daughter?"

"Of her husband," replied Mrs. Hinchliffe. "They are like brothers, I'm told. I know him very little myself."

"Brothers. I see," said the visitor. "How very nice! And he sings Italian duets with his friend's wife. Quite ideal!" One has no authentic particulars of the behaviour of a lynx on a week-end visit, so it is safest to say that Mrs. Bannister Stair seemed an observant person. Even a lynx, however, could have seen nothing, ideal or otherwise, next day; as Fred and Charles went for a long walk. When they returned, they found that the party that sat down to dinner would be a party of eight, by the time three guests from the neighbourhood had been announced. "Who are Mr. and Mrs. Wigham Baynes?" Fred asked of Charley, who replied:—"Haven't the slightest idea. But they live near, so Luce asked them to dinner. He writes things, I believe." The odd gentleman—to make up the eight—was a chap he had met at the Club, who was staying at Wimbledon. Something in the Board of Trade, Charley believed, but he wasn't sure. "What's his name?" asked Fred.

Charley wasn't sure of that either, but thought it was something like Monday Morning. "Look out sharp when Modicum announces him," said he. "It won't do to have him here all the evening and not know his name!"

"It isn't Munby Moring by any chance, I suppose?" said Fred. But it was. And Fred breathed a prayer that this gentleman had heard that he and Cintra were "off," and that he had not forgotten it.

Mr. Munby Moring was late, appearing some time after the above conversation. When one sees any acquaintance of hours gone by after its successors have passed into years, raptures are desirable, as for a dear friend risen from the dead. Fred executed his creditably, but Mr. Moring put too much side on. If his statements were trustworthy, nothing short of a rapid succession of miracles had prevented his calling every week through the whole interval to pay his respects to the Professor. And on each of these occasions he would have looked forward with joyous anticipation to the luxury of meeting his old friend Mr. Frederic Carteret. But his official preoccupations had been of such a nature that every social relaxation had been out of the question.

After exhausting this phase of the topic, Mr. Moring appeared to remember something he had forgotten, for he prefaced his next remark with:—"But—by the way!" Fred prepared for the worst. He knew it must come, and waited. Mr. Moring appeared to decipher in his mind's diary, and to experience confirmation. "Yes—by the way!" said he. "I was promised the pleasure of congratulating . . ." and stopped, with a sly or waggish identity asserting itself through his everyday demeanour. It was nipped in the bud by what Fred suspected was an inarticulate grimace of someone behind his back, probably Charley come to the rescue. As usual in such cases, Mr. Moring had not the slightest idea why he was to pull up short, nor even the inadvisability of saying:—"Oh, I beg pardon!" However, that didn't much matter, and Fred felt that, on the whole, he had got off cheap.

Over two hours later, when the four gentlemen emerged from the atmosphere of their cigars to join the ladies in the drawing-room, they found it empty, and heard the voices of the said ladies in the garden beyond, outside in the summer night. Then it was that Mr. Munby Moring, catechetical about the identity of Mrs. Bannister Stair, the friend of Charley's wife's mamma, detained his host to explain that he

had known that lady's deceased husband intimately in early life—in fact, till he went to India. Made a heap of money there, Stair did. Comin' home to see what he could spend it on, and got a chill, comin' north. You did, if you didn't take care. Great mistake, hurryin' off the boat, to save time, at Genoa. Much better go round by Gib. Nobody ever got anything on the chest, aboard ship. Let him see, wasn't she a Crackham? Must have been a Crackham. Or wasn't she one of the Strawbury girls?

Fred lost the rest, and presently Lucy's voice was saying to him, under the stars:—"I'm glad you're come. These women bore me. Suppose we walk about?" And they did so, leaving—said Lucy—her maternal parent to look magnificent by the light of a Chinese lantern, and make what she might of the literary gentleman. Charley would have to amuse Mrs. Novelist. Perhaps she would pass him on to her husband for copy, and he would get into print.

As for Mr. Moring and the former Miss Crackham, or Strawbury, they went as near rushing into one another's arms as one does—or two do—in blameless Society. They launched into a revision of all the persons both had known, all those that either had known and the other hadn't, and all those neither had known but both might have known. The classes were so numerous that they had to retire to a solitude, under an ilex, to do any sort of justice to them. And there Modicum provided them with a Chinese lantern, all to themselves.

"What were you and Charles doing in the colonnade?" said Lucy, giving the long passage a name it had acquired in the past year; somewhat unreasonably, as there were no columns.

"Yes—this evening, when you said there was nobody there."

"There *was* nobody there," Fred answered. "Nobody but ourselves."

They were in a leaf-covered avenue that crossed the end of the large garden. It had still the marks of its antiquity. The thick moss upon the gravel footway, the memories of something built of stone, disintegrating at the bidding of the damp—something that might have made part of a summer-house, or parapet at least, but that gave no clue to speculation to say what part. It ended—the avenue did—in a dead wall invisible for ivy, that only emerged into being as a cheval-de-frise at its top, much the worse for two centuries of oxidation. The place had been left a wilderness to satisfy Archæology yearning for a *raison-d'être*, and had not supplied it. But it suggested grue-

some memories of the days when Melancholia paced its length in silence, no sadder than its wont for the gibber of harmless Lunacy close at hand, unconscious even of the violent cries of the bad case in the padded room up yonder. For the lock-up for raving madness had been identified, by the iron stanchions of an upper window within the glass.

Lucy turned to her companion at the end of the path, by the dead wall. "Nobody but yourselves!" she repeated. "Upon your honour, Fred! Look me in the face."

"Upon my honour, no one!" He complied with her imperious word of command. But never had he felt more glad of his conviction that she could not see into his heart. It was a faith that stood between him and a madness as bad as any of its forerunners, here in the past. He clung to it as his sole resource against himself.

"You sound like a man speaking the truth," said she. "But then, who was it I saw?"

"You are sure you did see someone?"

"Perfectly certain."

"What was he like?"

"That's quite another matter. I wasn't interested enough in him to take his measure. If I had known you and Charles were going to deny his existence, I should have looked to see what he was like. I was some distance off, too."

"Well—he wasn't there!"

"I suppose he wasn't, since you both say so." Then, dismissing, as of no importance, this ambiguous unknown person,—for indeed that was what he seemed, with such small testimony for his existence—she turned to another topic. "You know the man that took me in to dinner—sat between me and mamma? What is he? Charles met him at his Club, I believe. But he didn't seem to know much about him."

"He knows as much as I do. I only met him once—a year ago. More."

"Where?"

Fred never could mention the name of Cintra's family with complete unconcern. "At the Frasers', a year ago. Oh—more than that! Yes—a good deal more." He seemed to consider the lapse of time an extenuating circumstance. "I really know very little more of him than you do."

"Fancy that! I thought he was quite an old friend, by his manner. But what a narrow escape he had!"

"I don't think I understand."

"Why—when he was ushered in. He all but asked you after . . . after that young lady. If Charles hadn't made grimaces—well!—all the fat would have been in the fire."

Fred laughed, or made believe to laugh. "It wouldn't have flared," said he. "He might have felt rather like an idiot, though."

"What should you have said?"

"Oh, I should just have said we had thought better of that—might have told him the young lady was engaged to somebody else. It would have been true."

"Yes. But suppose he had taken for granted that it had mellowed up and come off—that this Fraser girl was Mrs. You, in fact . . ."

"He couldn't have thought so. She would have been here."

"Oh nonsense! A cold—any little thing!"

"Well—he didn't think she was Mrs. Me, or anything of the sort."

"Don't be offended."

"How could I be offended at anything *you* said?"

Oh, the vanity of human resolutions! Here was this young man, who for so long had sealed up in his heart a futile passion that, for all its futility, seemed to him a supreme disloyalty to his friend—here was Fred Carteret, the moment these words had passed his lips, turning angrily on his inner self, to rend it for its indiscretion. For nothing can be more certain that that he who would conceal from a woman the fact that she has turned his head, had best beware lest by so much as half a word he implies that she is to him anything that Poll round the corner or Betsy over the way are not. Above all, let him avoid any accent on the lady's personal pronoun.

However, it could not be unspoken. Moreover, there was always a golden bridge—or was it a copper, or even a pewter bridge?—the bridge of Friendship. How many reciprocities have made the mere fact that it was near at hand, to run to on a pinch, a *modus vivendi* through a period of embarrassment! Besides, so long as the lady is silent, nothing comes of it. The burr in your sleeve remains stationary, till your arm moves.

They walked in silence the length of the pathway, and came almost within hearing of Mr. Munby Moring and the companion of his *tête-à-tête*, Mrs. Bannister Stair. They had got something to talk about, from the vivacity of their manner;

something with a lady and a gentleman in it, said Suspicion, always on the watch. But the very nature of this something had caused their voices to drop in a disappointing manner.

"I wish they wouldn't be so confidential," said Fred's companion. "It would be so amusing to know what they have found to talk about; apart from the pleasure of eavesdropping, which is always great." Fred assented.

What was it that lady and gentleman dropped their voices over, there in the summer night, out of all reasonable hearing of host, hostess, and other guests? To say nothing of their security among honourable people, best expressed by their young hostess's fearlessness of making eavesdropping the subject of a jest. The reason was probably the usual one for voice-dropping—the fear, that is, that he or she whom you are just speaking of will hear you speak of him or of her. For it was just about the time that the lady said, as a sequel to personal matters that do not concern the story:—"And who is the handsome young man? You know him at home, it seems."

"Eh—who—I? Well, I don't know that it goes as far as that. Don't even know where he lives, exactly. Was to have married the daughter of a man I know. That's all."

"Oh—I'm disappointed! I should have thought he was a long-lost second-cousin once removed, for instance."

"No—not a bit—not a bit! Merely met him—merely met him—at an old friend's. At her father's, in fact; but it was broken off, it seems. Snaith was tellin' me, just as we'd done our smoke."

"Didn't he get to *why*—to why it was broken off?"

"Can tell you what he *said*—mutual consent of parties—that kind of thing."

"And did you believe him?"

"Middlin'! Well—no—perhaps I didn't."

"Who was the other girl?" Really the story might just as well have likened this Mrs. Stair boldly to that lynx. For she was one of those diabolically penetrative people who have seen a great deal of the World. But it and she never came to a crisis. For her diamonds were unimpeachable.

Mr. Moring, on the other hand, professed a deadly discretion—a soul-freezing discretion—whenever any two persons possessing a sex ariece came within a league of one another. He may be said to have lived with his forefinger on his lips to show how much he wasn't saying about his neighbours. "No

—I say now!" said he. "No scandal against Queen Elizabeth. . . . Well—he never told *me* anything."

"And if he had you wouldn't have repeated it. *I* see. But— isn't that them coming back . . . ?" It may have been just at this moment that their words became inaudible.

Nobody on the other side of the evergreens could have heard Mr. Moring's:—"Shish!—they'll be off directly." . . . A short interregnum for their benefit followed, in tones ostentatiously audible; a mechanical recrudescence of the personal matters just disposed of. It referred to Llandrindod, where Mrs. Moring's rheumatism was receiving incalculable benefit. Llandrindod was in Monmouthshire, and Mr. Moring couldn't speak too highly of it. He could be audible with safety about Llandrindod. But as soon as the only possible audience was out of hearing, he dropped his voice illogically to secrecy point. . . . "You were going to say . . . ?" He came nearer to hear.

"It's those two I'm talking about. . . . Of course I *may* be mistaken. . . ."

"H'm!"

". . . But anyone could see, by the way they went on in the house."

"Which way? I *scw* nothin'."

"Stupid man—that's just the point. They looked the other way, and never spoke. And now—look at them! . . . Yes—this side."

This last referred to Mr. Moring's eyeglass, which he had started in chase of, over his waistcoat. He found it on that side, and directed a search-glare through it into the darkness, from which were audible the voices of the couple under discussion. But they were shrouded in gloom. "Can't see 'em," said he. "Take your word for it!"

"Well—don't do that! But look at them next time you get a chance. . . . Wait a minute!—they're coming back now."

Mr. Moring kept the gloom under observation. From it emerged, chiefly, a white cloud of muslin. In subordination as to size, but whiter, and sharper in outline, a shirt-front. The observer noted that these two objects approached through the gloom keeping the same distance apart. This was in favour of their relations being normal. "Well," said he, "I shouldn't say they were quarrellin', as far as I can see. That's nothin' to go by."

"Perhaps my penetration is at fault," said the lady, somewhat coldly.

Mr. Moring hastened to acknowledge the inferiority of his judgments of human nature. "Dessay I'm wrong," said he. "Not a dab at this sort of thing. . . . Never was!"

"Very likely I am mistaken. Let us consider that I am mistaken. But you can tell me who was the other girl."

"Can't—'pon my honour! My friend here—Mr. Snaith, you know—only told me the thing went off. Died a natural death by consent of both parties. Things do."

"But I understood that you didn't believe him."

"Well-l-l! p'raps I didn't, altogether. Didn't boil over, s'pose we say!"

"Rather a half-hearted belief—was that it?"

"Somethin' of that sort. Much better expression than mine. As I said, I'm not exactly—a dab."

"Then—who *was* the other girl? It comes to that."

Mr. Moring seemed a little restive under the incisiveness of this conclusion. "Put it that way if you like," said he. "Snaith said nothin' about her, anyhow. Don't believe he knows."

"My dear Mr. Moring, you men really *are*! Now is it likely that he *would* know? Be reasonable!"

"Don't follah, altogether!"

"Do you mean to say you don't see?"

"I see what you're drivin' at." A slight inflection of the speaker's countenance towards the gloom in which the unconscious subjects of this conversation were again approaching showed his appreciation of what was meant.

"Of course you do!" said the lady. Then a pause followed to allow voices and footsteps to get out of hearing. It gives the story time to note a curious fact. In this conversation absolutely no direct reference was made by either party to its subject.

It must have been at this moment that Lucy said:—"They've fallen flat—used the gossip up, I suppose."

"No, they haven't. You'll see they'll begin again when we're out of hearing." Which proves to be the case, for the moment the eavesdroppers' chance was gone the conversation freshened. No suspicion had crossed their minds that they were under observation.

That unfortunate stress on the personal pronoun had had to be actively ignored, by mutual consent. The young lady's abso-

lute silence in answer had seemed to take Friendship's efficiency to deal with it for granted. The opportunity for eavesdropping had helped to slur it over, and what passed in the gloom during the next turn up and down had been almost hysterically impersonal. But it rankled, that personal pronoun. Like the soul of the slain Redskin that soaks into that of his slayer, so it soaked into the conversation, and coloured it. It was its unacknowledged influence which dictated that a memory of the past should be disinterred, as soon as talk could go back to business.

"Do you remember one day," said Lucy, "when I had been over to see your mother, and you met me in the train?"

"Yes—a year and a half ago." He had dispositions to say he should rather think he did; but checked them after his experience with that personal pronoun. "You mean when we walked round Regent's Park Square in the sunset." It would have been safer to leave the sunset out. But why? Leave it in now, having done it.

Lucy palliated that sunset, with a judicious correctness of phrase. "I remember it perfectly," said she. "It was an exceptionally fine one. But do you remember what I said to you then, about Miss Cintra Fraser?"

"You wanted me to go back to her—to try to undo the past."

"I did. And when you said that was impossible, because you had ceased to care for her, I accused you point-blank of caring for some other woman; as, else, how could you know? And you admitted that it was the truth."

"It was the truth."

"Was? Then it is not true now? Oh, do say that that is what you mean!"

"I cannot. I did not mean it in that sense. It is as true now as it was then. Nothing has changed." His voice was strained, and he must have known it. He did not meet her gaze, but flinched from the burden of its enquiry, as he continued in short sentences, each one seeming to cost a separate effort. "But I can tell you nothing. Nothing is left to be said. I entreat you not to question me. The thing must be, and I must bear it. What harm is done? The penance is my own—leave me to deal with it. I could not tell you if I would—could not—could not!"

"Fred!" Wrenched as he was, her voice, speaking his name, was a solace to him. "One thing you can tell me, at least. Does this lady . . .?"

"Does this lady what?"

"Does she know it?"

"Know what? There is nothing to know."

"Is it nothing that you love her? Is she a stone?"

"She is as sweet-hearted as she is beautiful." The safety of saying this was as a breath of fresh air to him, half choked as he was with his life of secrecy. And his eyes could feast on her face unblamed, there in the dim starlight. "But this I do know," he continued, "that she knows *nothing*—and by Heaven she never shall know anything!—of my love for her, cost me what it may to conceal it." He should have stopped there, and kept a check on a too compliant tongue, under sway of a tempestuous heart. He should not have let it add:—"I shall never speak of it to her nor her . . ." He stopped with a jerk, and would have recalled the last two words. The others he might have compounded for, somehow.

But she had heard them too plainly. "Nor her what?" said she.

What a blunder to make! He had not seen that no question could arise of speech with a husband on such a matter except his relations with that husband had been like his with hers. But then, how was she to know what his friendships were? Would not open speech be safer than an entrenchment in silence?

He cut short weighing the subject, and said simply:—"Her husband." He was relieved when her next words franked him of explanation.

"Oh dear!" said she. "Then I see. She has a husband."

"Yes. But I have no reason to suppose she is not devoted to him."

"Has one ever? With any wife and any husband, I mean." She spoke drily; and, do what he would, the thought would creep across his mind of that demoralising suggestion of his mother's. Was that idea of Nancy Fraser's about her beautiful friend's coldness to her husband necessarily a fantastic dream? He repudiated it angrily, but it ignored his rebuffs. She went on speaking:—"But—poor Fred!—it is all over for *you*, any way."

"How could it be otherwise?"

"Well—I mean that it doesn't come into practical politics. The World is too much with us. But sometimes—not infrequently neither—it is otherwise."

"I don't know whether I quite follow."

"How slow we are to-day! Do people never drive a coach-and-six through . . . ?"

"Through morality? Of course they do. And we—we respectables—help the World to pull a long face over their enormity. But . . ."

She misunderstood his pause. "Oh, I can assure you," said she, "that I am not strait-laced. I feel very lenient towards the Sinner."

"I did not mean that," said he. "I am less strait-laced than I like to acknowledge—less than you would approve perhaps. But it does me no good in this case."

"Does you no good?" His words puzzled her.

"My loose-lacedness—if that's the word. . . . I am afraid I had better stop and say no more about it. For it is impossible that I should make myself understood."

They had twice or thrice been within hearing of the middle-aged gossips under the Chinese lantern, but the earnestness of their own talk had destroyed the charm of eavesdropping. At this moment they had the world to themselves, at the dark and silent end of the path. For all that, she dropped her voice to answer him, as though the stars with their light and the wind with its music in the leaves were best kept out of their confidence. "Listen, Fred," said she. "You say that this idol of yours is all wifely devotion, and that sort of thing. How do you know you are not mistaken? Have you ever dared—now mind—you are not to answer this question unless you like!—have you ever dared to speak of your love to her? Or have you perhaps—man-fashion—been treating her as though she, being only a woman, was entitled to no voice in the matter? What evidence have you of *her* feelings towards *you*?"

Fred felt much like the poet's wild thing taken in a trap, that sees the trapper coming through the wood. But he could not cry out. He must needs articulate some reply. He made answer, white as a sheet, and with the controlled voice that tells of its owner's distress:—"I have never said one word of it to her. She knows nothing. I do not know—cannot know—that if I did she would not despise and hate me."

The story can only suppose that the reason Mistress Lucy preserved so complete a self-command at this moment was the one it imputes to all women of her type under like circumstances. She stood committed to nothing—was safe in a supposed ignorance, a port of shelter at the slightest threat of storm. Had Fred given way to what was really easiest to him, and made full

confession that she, and only she, was the idol he had spoken of, she would always, if she was really in need of a haven, have had this one to run to. Who could blame her, for mere warm friendship, shown to her husband's friend? Why—any faltering in that friendship would have laid her open to a suspicion of consciousness on the subject, consciousness from which perfect innocence was free.

Anyhow, her voice sounded self-possessed enough when she made answer:—"And why? How can any woman despise and hate a man for loving her? I don't believe in that woman."

It was a kind of desperation that made Fred say:—"Not for loving her maybe, but for an act of perfidy—of treachery without a parallel—in this case." He ought to have kept the whip-hand over his tongue.

She drew the inevitable conclusion, and repeated it with perfect control. "Perfidy towards her husband, of course." She did not wait for contradiction, his only chance now of escape, but went on:—"Only—why without a parallel? What is her husband to you that you should be so scrupulous? Are you not thinking more of him than of her?"

Fred could not utter a word. How could he say:—"He is my oldest friend, and my dearest. His wife is a plant of last year's growth"?

She continued:—"Perhaps you think, as men do, that if you can conceal your love it is your right to do so. But how do you know you can? Love is harder to conceal than hate." He muttered something under his breath. "What is that?" she said. "You know that she is unconscious—is that it? Oh, Fred, is a woman ever unconscious of a man's love?"

"She is unconscious of mine." Fred believed this at the moment, with what was scarcely a hope lurking in the corner of his heart that the belief was unwarranted. Human nature was in ambush in a thicket of good resolution. The story is sorry for Fred.

"If that were a thing you could *know*, you might be right. But—how can you *know* it?"

"I am convinced of it. Do not let us talk any more of this."

There was, at the end of the blind alley where they stood, an exit under an arch of pleached boughs leading out on the lawn. Fred made as though he would pass through this and bring their conversation to an end by rejoining the party, on the lawn. She stopped him, standing before this narrow opening, with:—"No, Fred, not yet! Do not go in till you have told me more. You

had it on your lips to tell me but now. Whose wife is she whom you are so mad about—whose husband is so dear a friend as to make you hate yourself for loving her so much? Who is he that we have never heard his name?" Her hands were upon him to stop him, and all the lustre of her beseeching eyes was upon him, so near his own.

The middle-aged gossips under the Chinese lantern allowed the voices and footsteps to get out of hearing; then went on again.

"It goes without saying," said the lady, "that I may be altogether mistaken. No one is readier than I am to admit herself fallible. But . . ." The implication of this conjunction was, that a situation might occasionally arise which would be prohibitive of a false construction, even by an observer inferior to herself.

Mr. Moring seemed to wish to demur to this, but to lack physical courage. "I don't know quite—p'r'aps—whether I should go so far as that . . . 'pends on circumstances, don't it?" said he, feebly.

The reply:—"Time will show"—expressed confidence, with patience. Experts in prophecy can bear to await its fulfilment. Mrs. Stair, however, could be lenient to a mere outsider. "You would perhaps think quite differently, Mr. Moring, if you were in my position. Naturally, I hear things. You see, this young lady's mother is my very old friend." She paused a moment before adding:—"Let me see! I think you said your acquaintance with Mr. Snaith was not of long standing."

"Only introduced the other day, at the Club. . . . What's that? . . . Somethin' I don't know? . . . Nobody ever tells *me* anythin'. . . . I'm out of it." He was ready to imbibe information, and listened.

"I suppose I oughtn't to repeat things. Only really, when everybody knows them, it's absurd!" In point of fact, this excellent lady was itching to talk over some surmises she had indulged in about Charles Snaith, and the reasons why her friend's beautiful daughter had accepted him; and this gentleman, whom she was getting so confidential with, and who was in the way of hearing things, would be sure to be able to confirm or contradict these surmises. Briefly then, she told him—of course stipulating that he should have his tongue torn out with hot irons rather than repeat a word he heard—the whole of the story about Charles's relationship to the Earl, and his narrow

escape from a coronet. Mr. Moring undertook profound secrecy with a levity which promised ill for his observation of it. He was able to confirm citations from Debrett, and to add to that writer's information about this Earl's family particulars which he omits. Debrett finds no place for any statement that the Panjandrums are a dam bad lot—always were! Nor that Mr. Moring, or anyone else, wouldn't trust any member of that family with half a crown, or introduce her to any respectable female—not to his own sister, for example. But it would be a livelier compilation with marginal notes on the lines, out of course he has to take space into account.

Apart, however, from his admission of the inferiority of this Earl and his family, and the possibility that his host was a blood relation, who had drifted away from it, Mr. Moring showed incredulity. He managed to say, though he had to muster courage to do so:—"It's only your idea, you know!" He felt frightened when he had said it, and almost inclined to soften the impeachment by adding:—"But your diamonds are genuine."

Their owner frightened him still more, by making him repeat his words—a very good way. "It's only my . . . I don't know whether I quite understand. . . . What is my idea?" Her tone may not have been severe—that is too strong a word—but it was certainly forbearing, and forbearance is next door to severity.

Mr. Moring's tone was conciliatory to the point of self-abasement. "Very good idea—you know—" said he. "Very good idea! Quite right in itself. But still—don't you know—an idea! Don't see any other way of puttin' it."

"You mean that I have formed an opinion on insufficient grounds?"

"Oh no no! Wouldn't go as far as that—wouldn't go as far as that." He went on to point out that his expression might be legitimately interpreted as having no meaning of any sort or kind. It was merely a way of puttin' it.

Mrs. Stair allowed him to ring changes on disclaimers for awhile, then appeared to gather up for seriousness; to rally the conversation against discursiveness, as it were. "Would it very much surprise you, Mr. Moring," she said, "if I were to ask you to regard all this—especially what I am going to say to you—as a matter of the strictest confidence?" Mr. Moring was eloquent of his consciousness of obligation in this respect. The lady went on to say that her dear husband had frequently spoken

in terms of eulogium of Mr. Moring's peculiar gift of discretion, so she knew she might rely upon him. After which foreword, she got to the point, dropping her voice many degrees below the needs of the case, the better to defeat publicity.

"This girl's mother," said she, "is one of my oldest friends. I knew her as a girl, when she was exactly the same as she is now. . . . No—I don't mean in appearance, so you needn't hunt for your eyeglass. I mean in—well!—in individualities of character. No one else that I ever heard of would have allowed her daughter to marry a man on such very insufficient grounds. It seems to me to have been simple madness."

Mr. Moring had found his eyeglass by now, and was gazing at Mamma Hinchliffe on the other side of the lawn, to discriminate her individuality, and was not sure he was succeeding. "P'raps her daughter got the bit in her teeth—will of her own—that sort of thing!" said he, fragmentarily. "Some girls won't be guided. Once they get an idea in their heads, there's no getting it out."

"It was nothing of the kind in this case. Mrs. Hinchliffe told me herself that her girl was not in the least in love, and was not subject to sentimental nonsense. 'Then, Zoe' said I—her name's Zoe—'what on earth is she marrying him for, with a nose like that?' Because our host's dearest friend couldn't say his nose doesn't stand in his way." She stopped, to give her hearer time to consider Mr. Snaith's appearance, so far as distance allowed him to see it through lenses. Charley was chatting unconsciously with the author's wife, unaware that he was being overhauled.

Mr. Moring was considering how far he was bound to defend a nose whose hospitality he was, so to speak, enjoying. His verdict was equivocal. "Good deal of character in it, I should say," said he. "Good deal of character! I've known a many worse noses in my time though. . . . You were saying? . . . What did your friend—capital name for her, by George, Zoe!—What had she to say to his nose?"

"That is what I was going to tell you. . . . Only, as I said, this is strictly between ourselves. . . ."

"All right! You can rely on me."

"Well—she didn't say anything specifically in defence of his nose. How could she? Her words—as I remember them, and I've a very good memory—were 'I understand you to take objection to this young gentleman's appearance. I am no judge of appearances; besides, that's Lucy's business. However, I do

know one thing—that, nose or no nose, there are only two precarious lives between him and the Panjandrum property. And the title.' That's what she said."

"H'm!"

"Yes. And now of course everybody knows about this horrible noisy Lady Chitterling, and how his lordship married her when he was dying, to legitimate the baby that's just born—heir to the best part of three counties if he lives to come of age. I call it abominable."

"It's all regular. Quite legal. They say old Chitterling only did it to spite his other sons and daughters—all illegitimate of course—because he hates them. I don't know."

"Anyhow," Mrs. Stair said, reflectively, "Mr. Charles Snaith might very easily have inherited, if he hadn't."

"Narrow squeak! You think, then, that . . . ?"

"I don't think; I know. I mean I know that Zoe Hinchliffe encouraged her daughter's marriage because she believed that Mr. Snaith—whether he knew it or not—was within an ace of inheriting. At least, she never opposed it. And the daughter knew of the family connection. . . . Oh yes—she *may* have known of it and yet been in love with Mr. Snaith; nose or no! May have—may have—anything *may* have! . . . Well—you see the results." The speaker motioned with her head very slightly towards the darkness in which these results were buried. The footsteps and voices of their subjects, or exponents, continued to be audible, but it seemed to Mr. Moring that inference was a little too busy about them. After all, walking up and down a blind alley and conversing—perhaps in platitudes—is not an indictable offence, according to any statute of morality.

He made a half-hearted attempt to defend them. "Oughtn't we to have something—something more *decisive* to go upon?" said he. "Of course I don't mean for a moment to put my own—my own insight, you understand, on a par with that of a lady of experience."

She interrupted his rather unfortunate remark, saying in a freezing tone:—"I do not quite understand what experience you are referring to. I am not aware that my experience differs in any respect from that of—that of the World in general."

Mr. Moring made matters worse. "Oh—nothin' practical, of course. Only mean to say I never see these things myself. Always was a duffer over noticin' anythin'. Much sooner trust your impressions than my own! Really would."

As this was unconditional surrender, the lady accepted it;

only however slightly relaxing her severity of manner to say:—"I am obliged to you. I think you will find that I am right." She repeated her injunctions that this was all in solemn confidence, and recognised a move towards departure of the other guests. "I suppose we ought to think of going in," she said. "Stop a minute and let them pass us." This of course was Fred and their hostess, who emerged from the darkness in silence.

In perfect silence as towards each other. But Lucy had a society smile for the observant lady, and:—"It almost seems a sin to go in on such a night—now does it not? I should like to stop out till sunrise." Mrs. Stair applauded this wish, and lamented our artificial civilisation. Mr. Moring remarked that there wasn't any moon. Fred looked well round the sky, and said:—"No—I don't see any moon." Both seemed to think that Astronomy might have looked a little sharper. Then the couple passed on towards the group on the lawn, who were winding up for departure, for home or bed, as might be.

But Mrs. Stair turned to Mr. Moring, and said:—"Well—you saw! At least, I hope you did." His look in response was that of one who appeals in arrest of judgment, and he began:—"Must we . . . must we . . . ?" She caught up his words with:—"Must we conclude that there is something? Of course we must, when people look like that. But wait and see. All I say is—wait and see!"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE only departures from the house, to acknowledge the end of the evening and the beginning of the night, were those of the literary guest and his wife, and Mr. Munby Moring's. Or rather, they would have been, if Charles had not persuaded the latter gentleman to remain on through the smoking of a cigar and its concomitant chat. On such a fine night as this, he could saunter back to where he was staying quite easily. So Time might take care of itself.

"What!—go to bed at twenty to twelve! Bother Sunday night! No—come and have a smoke, dear boy! Do you good—soothe your nerves!" Thus Charley, to check a disposition of Fred's to say good-night, on the plea of a nervous headache.

Fred was not subject to nervous headaches. "Nothin' better than a mild cigar for a nervous headache!" said Mr. Moring. And Charley added:—"Come along, old chap! No more gammon!"

And his wife accompanied Mrs. Bannister Stair to her room, to make sure that she should not be left without every luxury under heaven; and consigned her to Morpheus with benedictions. Mrs. Zoe Hinchliffe, who had been magnificently, oppressively, silent through the evening—not that she ever was talkative—floated away to roost accompanied by a maid.

All the mansion was, so to speak, disbarred and unfrocked by a rout of domestics; except the little smoking-room to which the three gentlemen retired to pretend it was still yesterday, in the smallest hour of to-morrow's morning.

Fred was very silent and *distract*. So much so that Charley was uneasy about him. It was so unlike him to keep out of the conversation; to answer irrelevantly when spoken to; and to rather not have anything that was offered him, thank you! His human interests seemed to centre in the smoke he himself was making.

Said Charley, with his back to the recollection of extinct fires in an empty grate:—"Didn't know I was asking you to meet an old acquaintance, Mr. Moring. What's the lady's name?—Bannister Stair. Great friend of my mother-in-law."

"Well!" was the reply. "P'raps old acquaintance isn't the

expression. Married an old friend of mine's nearer the mark. But as a matter of fact I never saw her in my life before."

"Comes to the same thing, though!"

"Oh yes—comes to exactly the same thing! Plenty to talk about, you know—plenty to talk about."

"I thought you seemed very busy at it under the trees over there. She's a very . . . Well,—perhaps I should express it—she has been about a good deal. Seen a good deal of the World?"

"Quite so!" said Mr. Moring, in the tone of a man who feels bound to say something. "Quite so. A great deal of the World."

Charley eased off the conversation. "You and her husband were at college together?" said he, in an incidental sort of way.

"Yes—thick as two thieves we were. Oh yes—and for many years after that. It was after his wife died he went to India—his first wife, you know."

"Yes. I was thinking. Of course this lady was his second."

"Was his second. She's a rather different person from his first. We kept up our correspondence till the year of his death, her husband and I. Four years back, I suppose. Died of double pneumonia in Paris. Caught it in the Alps coming from Genoa. Much better have stayed on the boat, and come round by sea." But the lady reasserted herself. "He left her all his money though. I must say I did *not* expect that."

"Any children?"

"No—at least, none livin'. Son died."

"Then, why shouldn't he leave her his money?" Charley was interrupted by Fred, who rose to depart. He hadn't listened to the conversation, evidently. It was that nervous headache, presumably. Was he going to take anything for it? No, he wasn't—he was going to sleep it off. Good-night! When Fred had gone, Mr. Moring got back to the subject his departure had interrupted, seeming nevertheless only half disposed to say anything intelligible about it. "I'm not—at all—sure," said he, "that one ought ever to say anything to anyone. About anything. But gentlemen in your profession don't count. You never repeat anything."

Charles shook his head continuously. "Never by any chance," said he. "If you want anything kept secret, you can't do better than tell it to all the Solicitors in London. They'll keep it secret for you."

"All right. Chaff away. But I know you won't repeat it,

if I mention to you that that lady was not exactly . . . not exactly . . ."

"Not exactly what?"

"Not exactly a perfect wife. That's why I didn't expect her husband to leave her all his money."

"It *was* rum. But there's no accounting for people."

"None whatever. None whatever." He mused a moment and said suddenly:—"Are you—by way of seeing much of her?"

"Who? I? Why—no! Not very much, at least. She's a friend of my mother-in-law. Never been here before! Why?"

Mr. Moring became concrete and serious. "You may have observed, Mr. Snaith, or you may not—I have, certainly,—that when a lady has been, as the phrase is, blown upon, she becomes—in a certain sense—mentally diseased?"

"A—how do you mean?"

"Well—this way—she can't let it alone. When she sees a fellow shake hands with a girl she looks to see how long it lasts. When she sees two married couples playing whist or bridge, she keeps here eye on them all the evening. That sort of thing."

"Ye-es—I think I know what you mean. . . . Yes—I certainly know what you mean. And you think this good lady has—got like that?"

"Well—I think I may go as far as that."

"And I had better be on my guard against her? Is that it?"

"I shouldn't take everything she says for gospel—that's all. This was probably an attempt to discount the effects of mischief-making on the part of Mrs. Stair, for Mr. Moring doubted the soundness of her impressions. It did not reach his hearer's mind, for Charles only said indifferently:—"She won't talk scandal to me. Nor to my wife, for that matter. Besides, she isn't stopping on—is in fact going away to some friends at Beckenham, early to-morrow."

Mr. Moring, content with his effort, felt about for a change of topic. "Let—me—see!" said he. "It's getting on for two years ago that I met this young gentleman, Mr.—Mr. . . ."

"Carteret. Fred Carteret."

"Precisely. I ought to have remembered his name, but I'm bad at names. He was, as I remember, at the time very anxious and uneasy about a relative who hadn't turned up—was missing. I hope that affair all came right?"

"Well—no! I am sorry to say it didn't. Dr. Carteret never reappeared—never has done so, at least."

"Whew—you don't mean that? What do you suppose?"

"Don't know what to suppose."

"What do the police say?"

"They haven't given him up. Say he may be alive still—somewhere. . . . I believe that's what they think still. But I can't say for certain. I haven't heard anything lately." The old Doctor was rapidly becoming a memory—a thing to command a passing word, no more!

Very passing, in this case. For Mr. Moring looked at his watch, and said he must be going. But he had just time for a reminiscence, *à propos*. "I remember," said he, "now that I come to think it over, that our young friend Mr.—Mr. Carteret seemed rather surprised, that day I met him at the Professor's, to hear that a paragraph on the subject had been inserted in the daily Press. I was in some doubt shortly afterwards whether I should not write to let him know that I had heard—which I did quite accidentally—how that paragraph had come to be inserted in the *Daily Telegraph*, I think it was."

"Why didn't you? How was it?"

"It was McMurrough—he was sub-editor; is still, I believe. He said he had it from the family. So I supposed Mr. Carteret was sure to hear. I thought I needn't put my finger in the pie."

Charley heard the name as one hears chance names one does not commit to memory. "He certainly didn't have it from any of the family that I know," said he. "Or I should have heard. My recollection is that we all agreed that the less that was said about it the better. Especially in those blessed newspapers."

"Well—that's what he told me. That he had it from the family. Or stop!—was it through an intimate friend of the family?"

"Much more likely. That's the way of these things usually. Or it's a friend of a friend, or of a friend's friend. It's the fate of all first-hand information to have its edge taken off next day. However, you may take it from me that Fred doesn't know—what's his name? O'Dowd? O'Flannigan?"

"No—McMurrough. I suppose it was a liberty of the Press—a liberty the Press took . . . I say, I must be off."

The night air was sweet at the great front gate when Charley went out to see his visitor off. The laggard moon was rising in a sky that was showing no interest in the dawn over yonder, as he left that gentleman on his way towards Wimbledon, and sauntered back to the house. He found his own bedroom candle-

lamp awaiting him in solitude at the foot of the great staircase, which creaked as stairways do in the nightly silence as he passed up it, pausing to cancel a stray light or two that had outlived its fellow to make darkness visible to the last comer. As he passed the doorway of the room Fred occupied, he hung fire for a moment, and listened. Yes—a restless footstep within, pacing about!

"Hullo, Fred, old chap!—aren't you in bed?" He had to accompany this with a tap, speech above a loud whisper being irregular, near so much sleep presumably in full swing. Fred came to the door. "It wasn't locked," said he. "Come in." Charley came in, and noted that his friend's only bedwardness was shown by his having thrown off his evening coat and waistcoat and substituted a thin silk jacket, suited to the weather. He had shed his watch and some keys on the dressing-table, and kicked his shoes off. Otherwise he had made no concessions to the hour. An unappreciated hot-water can stood in his basin, moistening a towel in defiance of common sense, and falling slowly to the temperature of the atmosphere. His bed gaped for him in vain, offering pyjamas, and seeming to urge him to put them on and come to its bosom, unheeded.

"I say, dear boy, this won't do. What's the matter with you? You're feverish." So Charley said, and thought.

"Do I look feverish? Don't think I am—one—two—three—four." He reported on his pulse, with his finger on it.

"Come, I say! Never was a pulse as slow as all that! Give me hold." Charley took his wrist from him, and gave his version—*allegretto moderato*, against Fred's *largo*. "Look here, young feller! This won't do. You go to bed and go to sleep! What's the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter." This was very brief and conclusive.

"I say, Charley!"

"You go to bed and go to sleep."

"All right. In a minute. Or two. Or six. You know I've always been liable to sleepless fits—used to have them when I was a boy. Not like most boys, was it? Why—don't you recollect, when we were kids—quite nippers—at Vexton, and slept in dormitory twenty-two . . . ?"

"Rather!"

" . . . What a row I got the dormitory in for keeping it awake, because I couldn't sleep myself?"

"I should think I did! And old Cuticle came round in the middle of the night, and caught us singing Vilikins under the

bedclothes, not to be heard outside. Wasn't his name really Carter?"

"Something of the sort. But we called him Cuticle for being such a skinny beggar. Yes—he reported us, and we got a hundred lines apiece all round. . . . What fun it was, in those days!"

"Yes—and we didn't hate old Stultifex Maximus in the least. . . . Beg your pardon, old boy! I had quite forgotten." For the words had passed his lips before he remembered the tragedy of Fred's uncle, who of course was referred to. But was it the recollection of him that had somehow modulated Fred's countenance, and reset it in a minor key? May it not have been the memory of the old school-days, the thought of long ago, clashing with the dread of a gathering nightmare—the enforced ruin of an ancient friendship?

Charley could not be off seeing it. "What is the matter?" said he. "*Something's* the matter or you wouldn't look so."

"No—nothing—nothing! Nothing's the matter. Except a bit of a headache—not worth speaking of!" Fred tried for a laugh, but it didn't come off. He gave it up, and said seriously:—"I shall be all right to-morrow. Good-night, old boy! . . . No—I'm quite in earnest! There is nothing the matter."

Charley looked incredulous, tried visibly to find a solution of the puzzle, and gave it up. "Well!" said he at last. "Don't walk about all night this time. Go to bed, dear fellow, like a reasonable Christian, and sleep it off. Ta, ta."

"All right! Don't bother about me. I shall turn in presently—directly." He passed through the door after his friend, and watched him down the passage. Then he closed the door, and felt that a chapter in his life was over—the chapter about Charley Snaith.

For those few moments in which the story lost sight of him and his beautiful companion under the stars, in that walk so often trodden by madmen no madder than himself—those were the most momentous of his life. Ergo—he who reads this will think and say—he must then and there have poured out his heart to the object of his insane passion. He must have declared his love for her. This was not so, in the sense of the mere words. But in the spirit of their meaning, yes! For the man that catches a woman in his arms, and strains her to his breast as

though he could not release her if he would, breaks through the need of language.

Yet even in the very crisis of his long-restrained outbreak of feeling, he was conscious of a sort of stifled wish that she would yet save him, who could not save himself—that she would thrust him from her in impatient disgust; would prove, at the cost of his happiness, her inalienable fidelity to his friend. A mere straw, for the inner workings of his better self to catch at, drowning!! For never was acquiescence more complete—no trace of shrinking away from him, no reluctance when his lips touched hers.

Neither could speak. It was the moment of each one's confession to the other of what each had for so long kept back. For the story, in the dark about much of feeling and motive in the innermost hearts of those it tells of, is yet convinced—no proof is possible—that Mrs. Charles Snaith was nowise surprised at this sudden disclosure of Fred's infatuation. On the contrary, it believes that it was no secret from her even in the early days of their acquaintance; though then she believed that her own self-command involving command of the whole position was unimpeachable. She—a woman of the world—could indulge in the pleasure of this handsome young man's society, unscorched by flames on the altar of any Eros. Had she not accepted Charles Snaith, after analysing him thoroughly with her mother;—and was she not to be Mrs. Charles Snaith, heartwhole and undivided—at any rate so long as the gilt remained on the gingerbread of that possible inheritance?

Whether, before recent events had made that castle-in-the-air a thing of the past, she had begun to perceive that her amusement was not without its dangers, who can say? That she had, at the time of this interview with Fred in the garden, made up her mind what course to pursue under given circumstances seems to the story obvious enough. It is inclined to suppose also that she forced the running at the last; for she must have known by then, if she did not know before, that she herself was the cause of this distemper of the young man's mind. Was it likely that any man could be on such terms with *two* friends that his betrayal of either's domestic peace could be "treachery without a parallel"? This might seem to Fred a reasonable description of his behaviour to *her* husband, in case . . .

But what other woman's husband was there who could be the object of such a treachery? No—*she* was the woman, and she knew it, when she stood between him and an escape from his

own admissions, through the little archway at the end of the dark alley beyond the lawn. And he, walking to and fro in the silence of his bedroom, after his friend had left him, was little consoled to reflect that, technically, his pledge against avowal of her possession of his heart had been observed; that he had never said to her, in so many words:—"I love you."

What was Fred to do with the Monday morning ahead of him in the house of his dear old schoolmate—for nothing could alter *that* relation between them? Charley was Charley Snaith still, and would remain so for him to the end, come what might of this madness. But to be there in his unconscious friend's house, a traitor against him; to have an awful secret preying on the vitals of his soul, yet to be pledged to conceal it by every bond of honour to a fellow-traitor, was unendurable, even for an hour.

Fred knew, or thought he knew, what he should do to avoid those terrible days ahead of him. He would begone, somehow, somewhere—what matter where? To go away and endure his thwarted life alone, in new scenery, with new faces to look upon—that was possible, even if it was painful. This present *here* and *now* were two impossibles, even if they should come to be the place and time of an unholy delirious joy; a draught to be drained by stealth, with a bitterness to follow—the dregs of guilt at the bottom of the cup. He shuddered at his own forecast—shrank from the vision he conjured up, even as the knight of the old story shrank from the dark caverns of the enchanted mountain, yet heard the song and joyous laughter calling from the heart of it to him to come. Oh, that she had only been the legal possession of some man whom he could have hated! What a joy it would have been to defy the world—the calling, card-leaving world—for her sake! But—Charley!

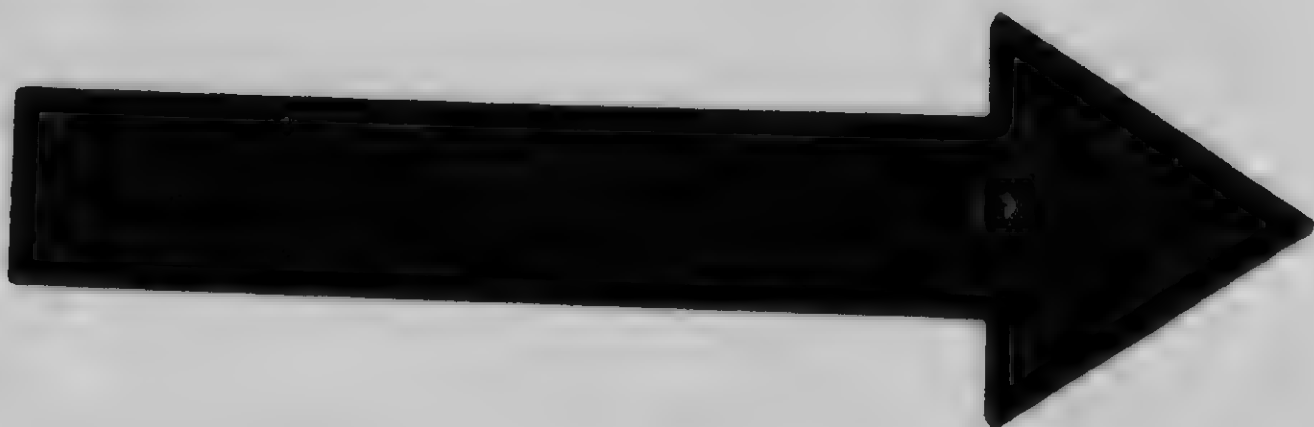
And yet, as he stood there, with the memory upon him of that moment in the starlight, scarcely two hours since; stood there with the touch of her fingers still tingling in his, the touch of her lips still warm upon his own; the consciousness of her name, unlike all others, still whispering in his brain; every fibre of his soul penetrated with her personality—as he stood there and spoke to his heart of his overwhelming passion as Love, and believed his own speech, was he not even as the word passed his lips doing the very thing she herself had condemned? Was he not placing her below her husband—ignoring her claims upon him because forsooth she was a woman? What right had he to let the well-being of any human creature—even Charley's

—weigh in the scale against hers, if her self-sacrifice was to be his guide?

No—to run away would be mere cowardice, and an ill requital of her confession—for her passiveness in his arms, brief as it was, amounted to that—that she returned his love. It was he that had exacted that confession, by overstepping established rules of conduct, as laid down by authority for himself and his like. Her acquiescence, in another class of life, would have meant little or nothing. Polly and Jenny and Bob and Bill, who play kiss-in-the-ring in public without remorse, are not strait-laced about a chance caress or two in private. Lucy's unresisting surrender to him meant—as he understood it—all that complete absence of protest could imply. After that, how could he run away from her, except at her own wish? It was a mighty little thing in itself, that winding up of their garden interview; but its implications filled the Universe. They were all the greater—all the deadlier, one might almost say—in that the interview ended, otherwise, in silence. . . .

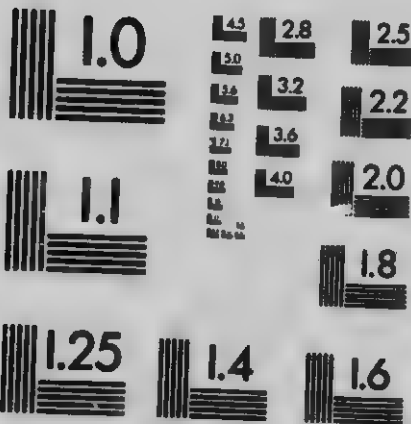
And yet—to remain there! To go on with the old life—as before; to be able to say, each to the other:—"Let us forget our love!"—how could that be possible? They had crossed the Rubicon, and the only word was forward—if he remained. And what would the future be, if that advance was made? For Charley, a hearth made lonely by a tried old friend—a disguised traitor! For him and for her, some new life—an unpalatable one perhaps—but exile in any case. Look the facts in the face. How could he inflict upon her a life in which the lightest evil to be borne would be her renunciation by old friends on moral grounds?—a much harder one being Christian forgiveness by others, accommodated to their conscience by the reflection that she was married to him now at any rate. A dire picture of a suburban home discriminately visited by some, avoided by others, shot through his fevered imagination. That would be the unkindest cut of all—the tempering of Injustice with Mercy.

He practised self-torture for another hour—suffered remorse for a crime that, so far as it was committed at all, would hardly have been regarded by Bill or Bob or Jenny or Polly as conferring on its perpetrator that status of a criminal, hardly so much as an honorary degree in the Faculty of Immorality. Then he lay down as though to sleep, with a parade of confidence in ultimate success, and was brought up short in his first approaches to unconsciousness by a question of some speaker in a coming dream, heard beforehand on the hither side of a gate of



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Dreamland standing temptingly ajar. It was a terrible question, for all that the unseen speaker spoke it so glibly. "What shall you say to your mother?" Then in a moment he was broad awake, with the cold sweat upon his brow of a new apprehension. What would he—what could he—say to his mother?

It was that pitiless whiteness of her soul, that would not allow her to picture a black spot on her son's, that stood between him and a full confession. Why could she not, when they talked together of Charles Snaith's beautiful wife, say to him jestingly:—"Mind you don't fall in love with her, Fred!" Why not some passing reference to the moth in the candle-flame? Why not anything for him to hark back upon, to make his task of revelation easier? What an easement to that task it would be to him to be able to recall some such light speech, and to go with:—"Well—your caution was needed. The moth is in the candle-flame." But now, with the barrier of her unconsciousness between them and the Sahara of her faith in him, in which there were no wellsprings of sympathy for human weakness, what were his chances of making an approach to a confession easy? Even if he began by saying:—"Your friend Miss Fraser is right for once, Charley's wife doesn't care about her husband, and had much better not to have married him, whatever her reason was for doing so,"—even if he tried to *entame* the subject thus, how much nearer would it bring him to saying:—"I am the cause of their estrangement, and had I concealed my love for her, I should never have known it was returned. It is I that am to blame, but it is impossible now to go back"? No—he knew what his mother would say. She would at once infer that there was another man somewhere—a potential co-respondent in a divorce case—but that this man should be her Fred!—why, see what dear friends he had been with this young lady's husband, from boyhood! "Absurd!"

In the end, the only determination that seemed to bring relief to the turmoil of his soul was a vague provisional resolve of flight, with explanations of his conduct by letter. It was no solution of the difficulties of the case. He saw that. Still, it substituted a bearable image of his future for one which seemed to leave no end, for him, but raving madness. He could picture himself to himself as an Ahasuerus, an Esau, or for that matter a Cain, a purposeless wanderer on the surface of the globe; the last outcast being a fit analogue for a man who stabs his brother, even metaphorically. But he could not come to terms with the future in any wise at all, if it was to mean a tension like the

present, at each week's end, with duplicity in every thought and action. Things might have continued as they were but for that incident in the garden, even though the two of them had each known the fact of the other's knowledge, so long as a plausible pretext of mutual ignorance was possible. But that one moment of indiscretion had put an end to whatever hope remained of a reciprocal concealment that was growing harder to maintain day by day. Fred had to accept a wild project to fly from his temptation, Heaven knew where, in order to gain a right to give way to sleep, quite two hours after his friend had left him.

CHAPTER XXIV

MRS. HINCHLIFFE, Lucy's majestic mother, did not return home after the departure of her friend Mrs. Stair for Beckenham, but remained on at The Cedars till next day. Her visits there always had an unpleasant effect on the master of the house, whom they reduced to a cypher. The expression is not the story's, but Charley's in conversation with Mr. Trymer, who had asked him to dinner at his own request when he suspected, though he did not know, that the good lady intended to honour his domestic hearth by her presence until Tuesday morning. His words to his principal were:—"Of course I love my ma-in-law, as in duty bound, but she reduces me to a cypher, for all that." Mr. Trymer nodded slowly and authoritatively, as though that had also been his experience of many mothers-in-law. "But she may abate, my dear boy!" said he. "She may abate. I have known very severe cases of them to do so." Charley felt the cheerful effect of Mr. Trymer's optimism.

"I asked Fred as you were so kind," said he, packing speech close, colloquially. "But he had another engagement. Some people whose name was new to me. Can't say I'm altogether sorry. Fred wants change. Gets moped. Do you know he scarcely goes anywhere except us and his mother's? He just sees *nobody*. Now, that's not right for a young man."

Mr. Trymer assumed a profound sagacity. "Is there by any chance," said he, "among the people whose name is new to you—now mind I am suggesting nothing!—but is there by any possibility . . . an Attraction?" He looked fixedly at the cornice of the ceiling as if he meant to do so till an answer came, and pulled at the cigar he had taken from his lips to ask the question. For this was at cigar-time, and the ladies had retired.

"Well-l-l—no! I should say not. I should say—certainly not. I'm not speaking from my own knowledge, because I don't catechise Fred on these points. But my wife is in his confidence, and would tell me if anything was up. Sure to."

"The burnt child dreads the fire! Is that it?"

"Something of the sort. Yes."

Mr. Trymer took his eyes off the ceiling, and nodded a general acquiescence in the order of Nature. Everything was evidently

what everyone would have expected. Still, the most optimistic philosophy might compare notes. "Nearly a couple of years too, now, isn't it?" said he.

"Thereabouts."

"The young lady married a . . . let me see! . . . Miss Fraser, wasn't she?"

"Cintra Fraser. Married a Professor Lomax." Both spoke as if Cintra had selected one of a species to marry, leaving a good assortment for subsequent customers. So she might have wedded a gnome, a vegetarian, a landed proprietor—anything.

Mr. Trymer wasn't really interested in the subject—was in fact merely conversing. "What name did you say?" said he.

"Cynthia? . . . Oh, Cintra—same as the place. Now, that shows what a queer thing memory is. I should have said the name was Nancy. There's a C in both, certainly. But . . ."

"There's a sister named Nancy. . . . I suppose you mixed them up. Nancy turns up at our crib still. Bikes over to see the missus. I never see her because I'm always at our shop when she comes. She and the missus are rather thick. I recollect her square with rather a pleasant mug. She's jolly well gone on my son, but I don't suppose it will come to anything, because of his years. She's well on in the twenties, I should say."

"And your son is . . ."

"One. At least, if you play fair, and count from when he first drew breath, he isn't quite that. But that doesn't prevent her being nuts upon him."

"Isn't Mrs. Snaith jealous?"

Something stood in the way of an answer, such as *badinage* of the conversation would have warranted. Charley looked odd over it, and paused. After a moment he said:—"Well—no—she isn't. I wish she were."

"Isn't that rather . . . peculiar?"

"I daresay I make too much of it. Most likely it's nothing but what they tell me—his nurse and others. They all say it's not so very uncommon with young mammas."

"What isn't?" Mr. Trymer was more interested.

"Mothers taking against their first children."

"I thought it was the exact reverse."

"So used I to. But they tell me that now and again they hate the poor little beggars. For giving such a lot of trouble. And the small cards are so unconscious all the while. And nobody ever consults *them*. . . ."

"How consults them?"

"Why—if they had any voice in the matter—they might prefer not to be produced at all."

Mr. Trymer could not entertain such an idea—was of opinion that all sorts of obscure and even forbidden questions might arise in connection with it. He presented the aspect of a pater-familias who felt he ought to say something religious and wasn't sure what. He got off the subject. "Still no hint—no suggestion of a hint—of anything to throw a light on that most mysterious disappearance!" said he.

"Dr. Carteret? Not a word. Do you know, I sometimes fancy that's the cause of Fred's low spirits?"

"Nothing more likely. I must say this—that nothing would be more welcome than a light upon that subject. I am imagining myself in the position of a relative. Absolutely nothing. Not even a definite certainty of murder."

"No—I agree. The uncertainty is hideous. Fred, I should say, doesn't admit the effect on himself. He frets about his mother though."

"She hopes still—is that so?"

"No, she doesn't. That's the funny part of it. She believes he *was* murdered."

"H'm! We have no direct evidence."

"She doesn't go by evidence. There's some rot about a dream—I don't know."

"Ah well well!—we mustn't be impatient." Mr. Trymer's implication was that it would not become us men, who of course are above superstition, to condemn woman, the weaker vessel, for susceptibility to it in trying circumstances.

"Oh. I'm not finding fault. It's all perfectly natural. One expects this sort of thing. Only—it travels. Once set it going, and all the females go off at score. Can't stop 'em!"

"You seem to speak as one who has suffered,—as though referring to a particular case, perhaps I should say?"

"Well—I do. Because—in a certain sense—I have. . . . You won't mention this?"

"Certainly not! Honour bright. Professional confidence."

"I don't know whether you happen to remember the details of Dr. Carteret's disappearance?"

"Fairly well. Yes—I think so."

"Well—do you recollect that the last time he was seen was at my house, The Cedars?" Charley went on to recall some of the facts, when his hearer interrupted him to say he knew all

"that perfectly well. "Then," said Charley, "I expect you'll be surprised to hear that they've cooked up a ghost out of that. They *have*! Dr. Carteret's ghost, as large as life! Soon we shan't be able to get a servant to stop in the house. Fact! The missus is just as bad as any of 'em!"

Mr. Trymer was ready, like any well-considered member of Society, to pooh-pooh the human ghost on his merits. But he was equally ready to analyse him from the point of view of a *priori* acquaintance with the ways in which any logical ghost would act if he were not in the nature of things non-existent. . . . He took time for reflection, then said:—"But Dr. Carteret was not in the house above half an hour."

"If that!" said Charley. "However—there's his ghost, sure enough. Everybody sees it, the minute he's told to. Or *she* does, anyhow."

But the weakness of Dr. Carteret's title to haunt The Cedars seemed to Mr. Trymer to call for consideration, before looking at him on his merits as a spectre. "Dr. Carteret had no *connection* with the house," said he. "He merely went over the premises to inspect them, with a caretaker. I don't profess to understand these things, but . . ."

"It is rather rum, certainly," Charley said. "But I suppose it would work out all right, as far as that goes. They would know all about that, at the What-do-you-call-it Research Society. I shan't ask 'em though, or I should be investigated, before I knew where I was."

Mr. Trymer still seemed dissatisfied, on the same point, going back on it. "How long do you make out that Dr. Carteret was in the house, all told?" said he. "Remember too that this house at the time was to him just like any other house. I believe there was then some question of his nephew taking it on lease. But there was not even an agreement." He went on to adduce precedents tending to show that no well-authenticated ghost would haunt a building he had only casually visited during his residence here below. He left the subject unsettled and asked Charley to tell him who had seen the ghost.

Charley gave him an abstract and brief chronicle of events as he recollected them. It included incidents the story has not referred to, chiefly as proof that a ghost will grow the moment the germ of it falls on fertile soil. He traced it all to his visit to the house with his *fiancée*, an age ago. She had then seen, by the merest chance, an elderly clerical gentleman, one among sundry persons who were viewing the premises at the same time,

just on the spot where Dr. Carteret had been left by the caretaker. It had never occurred to her till some months later that this worthy person, whoever he was, was other than incarnate. The drunken old caretaker had thought fit, long after, to deny that any other visitors were then in the house; whereupon Mrs. Charles, unaware of the fatal reaction caretaking has on the truthfulness of its votaries, had jumped to the conclusion that he was a ghost, or at least an hallucination—at any rate a phenomenon, not a party. Mrs. Klem had continued to ascribe the latter character to him. But then her veracity was at stake.

Well then—what was the consequence? No sooner had this casual visitor to the house taken rank as a phenomenon, than every blessed member of the household—cook, nurse, kitchen-maid, groom or gardener—who happened to see any stranger in or near the premises, at once contrived on enquiry to recollect that stranger as of clerical appearance, whereupon he was forthwith enrolled as a ghost. There was no stopping it once it was started. It set one of 'em off and the others followed suit. Mr. Trymer—said Charles—knew what uneducated people were. And that gentleman nodded a comfortable appreciation of the reasoning powers of the ill-informed.

“But, however,”—Charley resumed—“what was it brought up the ghost? Oh—I know! It was Fred’s mother’s unshakable conviction that Dr. Carteret was murdered. I know she has that idea. Because Fred told the missus.”

“Where did she get such a confirmed impression from? Didn’t you say something about a dream?”

“Oh yes—she dreamt something. Heaven knows what! But she would be sure to do that, if she once got the idea. I know the way she broods over it makes Fred very unhappy. Regularly gives him the blues, something does, anyhow. Don’t know what’s got him, this last day or two. Hasn’t a word to throw at a dog!” So they chatted on, the conversation tending towards discussion of the merits of a particular vegetable pill, as a remedy for nervous depression and low spirits.

Charley’s respect from of old for his senior partner often led him, as the foregoing conversation shows, to a frankness about his own private affairs which he would scarcely have shown to anyone else. That he gained very little by his candour is true, but his belief in the wisdom of the counsel that his adviser would have yielded, had he been so minded, made up for that.

This interview left him convinced that he had talked well over a good variety of subjects with Mr. Trymer, and had been profitably illuminated on all of them. He had a general impression of having gone for advice to a fountain-head, and got it. But, except that he had talked freely to that oracle of things he would not have taken Jones or Robinson into his confidence about, his chat with him was not much unlike what it might have been with Robinson, or Jones.

When Charley went to this gentleman's in the evening, or indeed anywhere in town without Lucy, he did not go back to Wimbledon, but slept at his old diggings in the Temple, which he had maintained from sheer conservatism. It was his practice on such occasions always to ring Fred's door-bell on the floor above, when he returned late at night, unless indeed the lateness meant that next day's clocks were striking. On this occasion he arrived home just after midnight and rang with very little expectation that his friend would reply to his summons. It was just a chance—no more. However, a sound came—foot-steps within, and then Fred, in darkness. Just returned presumably.

"Come along in, old man. I was just going to turn in. I'll light up." Fred was going as near as he could to the greeting he would have given his friend in the old days, before . . . Before what?

The gas was burning in the bedroom, and Fred was seeking a match to light that in the sitting-room. It was just too dark to distinguish costume. It was not until a fishtail of flame hissed into being that Charley said "Hullo!" about Fred's raiment.

"What's 'hullo'?" said he. "Oh—my togs!—Yes—I haven't been out. I cried off. Sent a wire to 'em not to expect me. Didn't feel like going."

"Won't Mrs. Fitzpettitoes—or whatever her name is—won't she . . . ?"

"Mrs. Fitzpatrick Ellison—not a bad shot, considering—won't she be offended? Yes—probably. Does that matter?"

"Well—she's a human creature, anyhow! But *why* didn't you feel like going?"

"Temper, I suppose. Impatience. I was sorry for Mrs. Gam. She had deranged all my things quite beautifully on the bed—and I disappointed her. I wasn't sentimental about Fitz. She'll get over it."

Charley ignored Mrs. Fitz. What did she matter? There

was Fred, with that strained look on his handsome face, and every appearance of having passed an evening of lonely self-examination at the best,—possibly of some more effectual mental torment. The aroma of a Havana said unmistakably that it was not long extinct, and that it had been smoked in that room and no other. "What's gone wrong, dear boy?" Charley said. "Something's gone wrong."

Fred roused himself to a vigorous disclaimer. Oh dear no!—nothing had gone wrong. A little out of sorts, perhaps. Felt that a quiet evening would do him good. It did, sometimes. No—really and seriously—nothing was the matter. He did it very well, all things considered. How was old Trymer? An ill-thought-out question, as Charley saw his partner every day, and Fred never asked after him. Who else was there? Not a soul but the family; however, it was a better question—it deflected comment from his appearance.

"You see," Charles said, "I asked myself. So I didn't expect company. I told him candidly I wanted to get away from my august mother-in-law, and he was very obliging and sympathetic. It was really all the better, because I got an opportunity of talking to him. I always go to him for advice. Because he is the very soundest of advisers. Quite a tower of strength."

Fred looked like a person who thought he ought to look interested and said, rather absently:—"What does he think about—about mother-in-laws?" He only settled how this question was to end, half-way through, so he failed to suggest that its answer was vital to him.

"Oh—well—I don't know that he said any one definite thing about mothers-in-law, as such. Nothing one could exactly repeat. But there can't be much doubt what he *thinks*. The way he said:—'You can always run away from yours here,' showed that plain enough. However, I think you know, he looks on them as distinctly inevitable."

"A—oh yes!—mothers-in-law. Inevitable! Of course they are. Yes—inevitable!" But he was not thinking of what he was saying.

Charley turned a curious eye on him. This was not like Fred. He was very much out of sorts, clearly. But stop!—was it not possible that . . . Yes, that must be it! Charley hung back a moment, then said suddenly:—"You've heard something?—about your uncle?"

It roused Fred. "Absolutely nothing," said he. "What

makes you think so?" He was all on the alert to show that he was normal. But he knew the contrary.

"Only your manner, dear . . . ! You made me think. But I'm glad there is nothing." Fred looked enquiring. "Why, don't you see?—it *couldn't* have been good, with a face like that!"

"What—my face?" Fred tried a laugh over this, with only moderate success. Then, it relieved him to make his voice serious. "Of course. I understand. It could only have been—what my mother thinks. Or good news. In that case . . . you would have seen it fast enough, without telling."

"I suppose I should." He kept on looking at his friend reflectively, as though to get at the heart of his mystery; then said, suddenly:—"I wish you would tell me what the rumpus is, Fred. I'm sure there's something."

Fred saw he must put more backbone into his mendacity, or it wouldn't tell. "I'm all right," said he, in a convincing manner, as if he was really speaking the truth. "Only I want to get to bed." He was taking good care to mean what he said, for purposes of veracity. Really capable liars always do this, and he took a leaf out of their book. He rubbed it in, by a crushed yawn behind his hand.

Charley looked very doubtfully at him, but had to surrender. "If that's it," said he; "bed's the best place for you. Adoo, old man!" He was through the door and had closed it behind him before Fred had found a word to soften off the position.

And those footsteps dying on the stairs were Charley's—his old friend of so many years. And there was the shadow of a lie between them—of such a lie! A few final words over the stair-rail would palliate matters, perhaps. Fred was out in time, and speaking to him on the lower landing, just succeeding with a rather troublesome latchkey.

"I say, Charley!"

"Hullo—out again? Go to bed! . . . No—what is it?"

"Nothing particular—at least, it will do in the morning."

"Go ahead!"

"I've an idea of taking a run at the end of this week—going away for a change. So I shouldn't come down, Saturday."

"You're a mercurial sort of party. Why this week? Why not next?"

"Can't say exactly. Got a restless nt. That sort of thing. If I wait till next week I may change my mind."

"You hadn't thought of going this morning, in the train. At least, I don't believe you had."

"I don't think I had. I got the idea sitting here thinking things over. It came with the baccy-smoke."

"Where do you think of going?"

"I think I shall make it Norway. There's a very good boat for Christiansand on Friday. That's one of the reasons for going this week. If I can't get a passage I shall have to stand it over."

"Well—you must square it up with the missus. I know she particularly wants you next Saturday."

"All right. Tell you more about it in the morning. Ta, ta!" For Fred felt that if the conversation was going to drift that way, he was best out of it.

It was something, at any rate, to have announced his intention of taking a holiday abroad, and that Charley had not seemed, on the whole, to see anything very extraordinary in it. What on earth, except his uneasy conscience, should prevent his taking a run on the Continent for unimpeachable reasons? He could be influenced by sane and ordinary motives, with the holiday season so near at hand. There was not the slightest necessity to go abroad to escape from himself. He could ignore his wish to do so, and find a hundred ways of accounting for a trip to the south of France or Switzerland. Or perhaps he had better stick to Ncrway, because it would be hot, going south.

This resolve, to shut his eyes to the problems that were afflicting his life until he had left the country for reasons entirely unconnected with them, was an anodyne to the disquiet of his soul, and may have had a share in procuring him a night's rest. There was, however, plenty of reason that he should sleep, for his accounts in that quarter were terribly in arrear. He waked late, from dreams of himself and Charley at school together in the old days, to find Mrs. Gam knocking at his bedroom door with a message from Mr. Snaith to say he had breakfast ready for him in the room below, and would he prefer eggs or kedgerree, because there was both?

"Very well. Go to Norway, by all means!" said Charley. "Do you all the good in the world, old chap! Wish I was coming with you."

Fred felt all perfidy from head to foot, as he assumed nonchalance to say:—"Wish you were, old boy! I may think better of Norway though. I had an idea of getting out of the heat.

Only some say it's just as hot there as anywhere else, in July. And I believe the skeeters are diabolical."

"So I've been told. But look here!—When's the boat?"

"Saturday—early."

"To-night is your Maida Vale evening, isn't it? Well—you must come to-morrow, or Thursday, or Friday, to say good-bye. Lucy won't forgive you if you don't."

Just what Fred was afraid of!

The distance of Mr. and Mrs. Snaith's suburban residence from the centres of things, often as its existence had been disproved *a priori*, had asserted itself very shortly after their marriage, and its inconveniences were at this time becoming vociferous. One way of silencing them and making evening visiting a possibility was for the lady to sleep at her mother's, while Charley almost invariably preferred to spend the night at his own old haven in the Temple. It was part of his system of minimising his mother-in-law, who submitted to his absence with a good grace, suggesting that it was not entirely unwelcome to her.

In the evening of the story—Fred's Maida Vale evening—Mrs. Snaith, having been driven up from The Cedars by her mother, was awaiting her husband at Devonshire Place to go with him, after a slight refection, to the Lyceum. He arrived duly, behind an adequate shirt-front and necktie, but alone, naturally.

"What—you haven't brought him!" was Lucy's greeting to her husband, in a tone of real disappointment, which Charley seemed to share to the full.

"No—I wanted the beggar to chuck his mammy for once. I told him I should bore you horribly. But he wouldn't come. . . ."

The two were not absolutely alone at the moment. Probably had they been so, Mrs. Snaith would have concealed her chagrin even less. For she was quite alive to her husband's unsuspicion. But an observant eye was upon her, that of Mrs. Bannister Stair, who had just arrived, to avert loneliness from her friend Mrs. Hinchliffe, and was taking mental notes. She listened carefully to Charley's continuation:—"He's got a restless fit on him, and wants to go to Norway. Can't quite make out what's the matter with him. Something's up."

Lucy appeared taken aback. "What can he want in Norway, of all places in the world?" said she.

"I've nothing to say against Norway, if he chooses to go

there," said Charles, refusing to take sides. "As far as the place goes. It's the going I object to. Why can't he wait till going-away time comes? He's got the hump, and wants a change. He spoke of going early on Saturday."

"Oh, Saturday! Then he won't come to us on Saturday."

"No—he certainly won't," Lucy looked blank. "He'll come to-morrow or Thursday or Friday." She appeared relieved. "I may not see him to-morrow, but he'll write." She looked blank again.

"He *must* come!" This was spoken with a passion beyond the occasion. But it pleased Charley that his wife should be so *intriguée* about his friend's comings and goings.

What did the bystander think, whom Chance had permitted to hear this domestic dialogue? Well—Mrs. Stair conveyed that she acknowledged the beauty of this family's character; so Arcadian-pastoral—so free from the taint of this shocking World. But she would look in another direction—at the interesting water-colour there, for instance—rather than obtrude her impressions about what was no concern of hers. She was an outsider.

Mr. and Mrs. Charles drove away to the stalls of the Lyceum after the slight refecton, and saw a problem-play which neither recited its enunciation nor arrived at Q.E.D. They left Mrs. Charles's august mamma and her visitor to a better developed refecton, announced as soon as the house was clear of them.

Lucy was looking her best, and her husband felt that his lot was indeed an enviable one to have such a wife to take to the play. If only there had not been that empty seat! For Charley—humble being that he was at heart—never felt able to live up to the meteoric wife he had married, unassisted. And his handsome friend rounded up the position, and completed it. Not to have him with them was bad enough, but to have an empty stall beside them in which he should have been, and was not, made matters worse. Charley had an uncomfortable feeling, helped by Fred's enigmatical demeanour, that something was wrong—he couldn't guess what. It was, however, a reassurance to him that Lucy seemed as little contented about it as himself. For if it was not that that made her so very brief of speech to a deserving husband, what was it? If it was Fred's defection, and this sudden impulse of his of a voyage to Norway, he was quite at one with her—completely in sympathy.

Let anyone who doubts the possibility of this state of mind reflect that the actual facts of the case were inconceivable by

Charley; and that, had they been presented to him on any evidence, however satisfactory, they would only have seemed to him a grotesque dream.

They were rather late, owing to the block in Piccadilly, which one always thinks isn't going to happen, and which has never been known to miss its appointment yet. But they only lost a preliminary housemaid, whose outspoken, or rather vociferous, soliloquy while she dusted was a short sketch of the leading characters, schemed by a playwright who would not allow them to speak for themselves.

"Oh dear—there's a man I'm supposed to know. And I shall have to introduce him." Thus Lucy, distinguishing the contents of one dress suit from its congeners in a group that was preceding them into the stalls.

"Where the difficulty?" said Charley. "Fire away! He looks like an Irishman."

"He is an Irishman,—writes for the newspapers. Irishmen do. But what on earth should possess me that I should forget his name? Oh dear—whatever is it? O'Donoghue . . . O'Leary? Something quite as Irish."

"Call him O'Donoghue and O'Leary then, and say you forgot."

"Oh no—it would never do for a . . . Never mind now! I'll tell you after." For the Irish gentleman was upon them, claiming acquaintance, and Lucy had slurred over the name difficulty by her sudden perception of the necessity to introduce her husband. He had been cut short off at Mister. A discomposure reigned—a magnetic disturbance of the atmosphere perhaps. Charley beamed with a fixed geniality. He had learned from previous experience the best attitude to assume with antecedent male acquaintance of his beautiful wife. They were numerous, he knew. But she might at least have remembered their names!

This one dies away, after a profusion of sentiments of esteem from Charles and Lucy, such as we all feel, in crowds for persons of ill-established identity. But, at plays, when chocolate abounds between the Acts, and hardened playgoers smoke in the lounge till they can exasperate you and me by coming in after the curtain is up, and getting in our line of sight, weak-spirited domesticated persons stop in their places and await developments, the more dare-devil among them going so far as to pay visits to boxes, preferably containing baronets. Now, this Irish gentleman, whose name Lucy suddenly recollected when he had

got to his own stall, a mile off—too far off to call him by it,—seized this opportunity to pay another instalment of his respects to Mrs. Charles Snaith, and was motioned or mesmerised by her into the empty seat beside her. Having secured him she said to her husband, who was showing restlessness:—"I know you want to smoke, Charles; so you may desert if you like. Go and have a cigarette outside, and then you won't look so miserable. Mr. McMurrrough will amuse me." For the gentleman was that sub-editor of the *Daily Telegraph* whom Mr. Moring had mentioned two days ago, but whose name was not active enough in Charles's memory to revive with its repetition by his wife, although she had spoken it audibly to show she knew it.

Charley, whom Mr. McMurrrough had disappointed by the purity with which he spoke the tongue of the bloody-minded Saxon—for he had not a syllable of brogue to throw at a dog—accepted the suggestion of a short smoke in the *coulisses*, and only consumed half a cigarette before it was time to return to his place. So returning, he caught the fag-end of what seemed an earnest conversation between his wife and this gentleman, and was pleased to note that, when moved to speak naturally by interest in his subject, the latter cast off the correctitudes of an acquired cockneyism, and fell back into the more musical accent of the Celt. But the curtain was rising, and people were shishing and saying sit down, and one of the most popular of actresses was waiting for a real hush before beginning to be Hilda. So Mr. McMurrrough had to get away with all speed, and the house was soon absorbed in that young person's perplexities, which a little common sense and right feeling on her part and a deafness to the needs of the stage, might very easily have avoided.

Said Charles to his wife, in her mother's carriage which had come to fetch them:—"What was the Irish party so earnest about when I came and interrupted you and him?"

"Mr. McMurrrough? Oh—nothing. He wasn't earnest." She seemed a little taken aback.

"He was earnest enough to speak Irish. He said 'I'll plidge mesilf. I'll kape ut in mind.' What was he pledging himself to? What was he going to keep in mind?" It was just a chance that he looked round at his wife as he said this. He might have been lighting a cigar. As it was, his eye rested, the moment after he spoke, on a beautiful face thrown out of all composure by some disturbance of its owner's mind. "What's the rumpus, Luce?" said he, innocently.

She turned her confusion into an uneasy laugh. She did not want to tell the cause of that rumpus. But she could evade the difficulty easily enough, surely! This man was too docile to give trouble. "Silly Charles!" said she. "Don't you know that one shouldn't ask questions, sometimes? You shouldn't force me to tell you how unfeeling I had to be to Mr. McMurrough—I mean a couple of years ago."

"Oh—was that it? I see." He was so unsuspicious that his comparison between the Irish gentleman's words and the young lady's way of accounting for them hung fire, until indeed she had become quite comfortable in the thought that he had forgotten them altogether. It was disappointing to have him hark back on them, and seek for explanation. "I can't see though that what he said arose out of the question before the house. Why should an illigant young gay female's non-appreciation of an Irish gentleman lead to his plidging himself to anything two years after? And what was he to kape in mind?"

"Oh dear—how you do keep on worrying over that man! What did you say he said?" Charles repeated again the words he had heard, doing more than justice to the brogue. Lucy had by this time recovered her self-possession. "I wonder what it was that sounded like that," said she. "It wasn't that. But I can't remember what it was—the last thing he said." She underwent severe recollection, but could make nothing of it.

To understand why her husband accepted this without a wavering of doubt would be to know what is meant by unswerving faith in a blindly worshipped idol. The Calabrian peasant does not kneel to Our Lady of Sorrows in the church of his boyhood with a more unquestioning devotion than was Charles's to the sovereign of his heart. Probably the *contadino* has the best of it—but who shall say?

If Charles had been on the stage, he would at once have perceived—to make the piece move—that this Mr. McMurrough was the person Mr. Moring had spoken of two days since, who was responsible for that newspaper paragraph about Dr. Carretet. He would then have proceeded, as fast as soliloquy could carry him, to the conclusion that his then-*fiancée* had communicated the facts to that Irishman in spite of her solemn promise of discretion. Being off the stage, the only effect of the germ of such a suspicion, if it existed—was to establish a conclusion of its own falsehood on the ground of Lucy's intrinsic veracity, rock-bedded on fundamental truth. Such an idea

passed off his mind at once, especially as he had not been giving his whole attention to Mr. Moring and his mind had taken a very loose hold of the Irish editor's name.

She knew this and in the luxury of her security kept the subject needlessly in the foreground, wondering what on earth it was that sounded like what Charles thought he had heard. There was only one point she was quite clear about, that he had heard wrong.

Nevertheless her interview with the gentleman, while Charles smoked in the lobby was somewhat as follows:—"He'll be very happy smoking, Mr. McMurrough. You're not to go with him. I want you here."

He lapsed slightly into brogue. "Nobody more delighted then mesilf," said he.

"I want particularly to speak to you. You remember my telling you about Dr. Carteret, who disappeared?"

"I do. No, I don't—Yes—of course I do—Dr. Drury Carteret! Has he turned up again?"

"Not at all. He seems to have vanished. But I owe you a grudge about him."

"You owe me a grudge!"

"Yes—don't pretend you don't know why."

"No pretence at all. Honour bright all round! What will ye be owing me a grudge for, then?" The brogue hovered about his tongue as he said this.

"Do you mean to say you didn't know that I told you all that in the strictest confidence?"

His native speech began to get the better of him. "Yiss, to be sure. In the sthrictest confidence!"

"And you put it all in the newspaper!"

"Will thin, I did. In the sthrictest confidence. Iverybody we insurrut is communicated to the public in the sthrictest confidence."

"Don't be nonsensical! You know perfectly well I didn't want you to make a paragraph of it."

Mr. McMurrough became aware that the young lady was not to be trifled with. He dropped the brogue to say that he had only supposed the confidence to be the usual confidence of gossip, which is never accepted as binding on its recipient. Indeed, beyond saying:—"Of course you won't mention this," in a perfunctory way after giving full particulars, Miss Hinchliffe had done nothing to secure his secrecy. Mrs. Charles Snaith said she had. The gentleman was very apologetic, and promised

never to do so any more. He had no idea of getting anybody in a row.

Lucy took him into her confidence. There was no row at present, but there might be if her husband came to know that the newspaper paragraph was traceable to her. Would Mr. McMurrough be so kind as to give someone else's name as his informant, not hers? He nodded comfortably, in a conclusive kind of way. Oh yes—he thoroughly understood!

They then talked a little about the play, and a little about the weather, until the former threatened to begin again, when Lucy, seeing her husband coming back, gave Mr. McMurrough a hurried reminder of his promise. To which he replied, accentuating his *bona fides* by a resumption of the brogue, in the words that Charles just caught as he arrived to resume his place, only just in time for other people to spoil his introduction to Act Two, Scene One.

So that Lucy's attitude about this interview in the carriage with her husband was distinctly mendacious. But, at the time, with her living presence to stand between him and a doubt of her veracity, such a doubt was as impossible to Charles's mind as a doubt of the North Star would have been to the mariner of old, before a single compass had pointed to any Pole at all.

When they arrived at the Hinchliffe mansion, they found Mrs. Stair's carriage just absorbing her at the door. In spite of a mutual gush between that lady and his wife, expressive of the rare benevolence of Destiny in permitting them a momentary meeting on the doorstep, the latter threw out to his surprise a suggestion that the former's temper was ruffled. Her words were:—"Stair's miffy. I suppose she and mamma have been quarrelling," to which he replied:—"H'm—she seems all right to me—can't see the miffiness."

She said:—"Chilly, at any rate. Of course you can't see. You men never can." Then, with more interest in her topic:—"Now mind, Charles! You've got to *make* Fred come to-morrow, whatever he says. Or next day at latest. Because we have bores coming on Friday. . . . There—that'll do! Good-night!" Whereupon Charley, nowise damped by the frustration of a farewell kiss—in fact regarding it as rather charmingly capricious—took his departure into the summer night, lighting a cigar.

If the observations of Mrs. Stair's carriage retinue, while it stood at the door for the most part of an hour, were shrewdly

made and well-grounded, the evening she and her hostess had passed together had not ended peacefully.

For Archibald, the young man in attendance, who must have cost a good deal to dress like that, put on record to Chambers the coachman, shortly after their arrival at the door, that they seemed getting on amiably on the first floor. Which caused the only sign of vitality of which Chambers was capable, a slight deflection of his eyes towards the house he had reined up at. Otherwise he remained monumental. Archibald added what seemed a contradiction, "Amiable as a house afire, I should say!" But no one who is accustomed to the system of always conveying an idea by inverting it, the common method of a very large class of Englishmen, will be the least at a loss about Archibald's meaning.

Chambers deflected his eyes again, with the slightest stir possible of his smile-muscle—one whose mechanical action produced no smile—and seemed to try for the opinion of the off-horse, by stroking him with his whip, but without result. Archibald listened for awhile to the voice of an indignant dame, that was finding its way through an open window above; and, when another voice took its place, announced the change by saying:—"That 'un's owns, just come in." After a few seconds, he supplied a commentary. "Temperate re-monstrance, you might call it." Then, when the former voice interrupted emphatically:—"Here's old Spitfire back again! Fresh as a daisy! *She* don't spile by keeping." He was the only contributor to these marginal notes, for the slightest changes in Mr. Chambers's countenance were the barest acknowledgment of their value.

On the whole, a comparison between them and Mrs. Charles Snaith's impression that Mrs. Stair was ruffled seems to point to a stormy interview having taken place during the younger lady's absence at the Lyceum.

CHAPTER XXV

How nice it would be, whenever we have something unpleasant to confess or communicate—something that must be unwelcome to the ears that have to hear it—that those ears should always be on a head we hate. Surely it would be better economy to inflict all painful confidences on our *bêtes-noires*, and keep our pleasant news for those we love. Unhappily the only satisfaction we ever get in this direction is in keeping secret things our foes would like to know. A short-lived pleasure, because some other chap tells them!

The idea of rushing away, and leaving his mother in the dark as to the reason why, did not present itself to Fred Carteret as humanly possible. But then the other idea, of telling the whole truth—and not only telling it—but getting her to believe it—seemed to him superhumanly impossible. Seriously, how could he set about it? As he walked across Regent's Park from Portland Road station the next evening—when he was naturally due at Maida Vale—he mentally sketched out plans to be adopted for approaching the subject. There was the vigorous, trenchant plan, somehow thus:—"I wish you to know that I love my friend's wife, and have good reason to believe that she loves me, and is indifferent to him. I propose, under these circumstances, to go to America, and am taking my passage to-morrow by the . . ." At which point he was stopped by want of information of day of sailing. Then there was the cautious, delicate method—the approach on tiptoe, as it were—on these lines:—"I have been for some time in doubt as to whether I should or should not take you into my confidence on a subject which . . ." But he cancelled this method on its merits before he got any farther. Hypothetical schemes recommended themselves for awhile, beginning:—"What, I wonder, would you say if I were to tell you . . .?" or "What would you do if you found yourself in my position?" Which last involved itself in a ridiculous sententiousness:—"Or rather, I should say, what would you recommend me to do if I were to confess to you that," etcetera, etcetera. But he discarded all such prolegomena as impracticable and unsatisfactory, and arrived at the gate of his mother's

front garden believing that when he repassed it next day he would be no nearer a solution of his difficulty.

And so it might have been, but that Nancy Fraser had written the day before to ask if Mrs. Carteret could have her to-morrow instead of Friday, because of reasons, and would she wire reply if not? It was Fred's day, she knew; but just for once wouldn't matter. This referred to a tradition that she and Fred were best insulated; which was considered ridiculous, but showed a strange vitality. It had nothing to do with household matters. There was plenty of room in the house, and, indeed, Nancy had long since been allotted special quarters upstairs, and was on the footing of an inmate, almost as much as Fred.

Thus it happened that, as he came up to the gate, a young lady arrived on a bicycle and dismounted on the pavement, having trespassed thereon over a dip in the curb; such a one as the bicyclist turns to account on familiar ground. She took an apologetic tone in her greeting to Fred, saying as she shook hands:—"I'm sorry it's me. I couldn't make it Friday, this week. But it shan't occur again."

"Well, but—why?" said Fred. And he really meant the question, for he had gradually merged his bygone antipathy to this young woman in gratitude for her devotion to his mother.

She left some essential out of the conversation, and jumped at once to:—"Oh, then it wasn't that!" with all the honesty of her hazel eyes fixed thoughtfully upon him. Whereupon he naturally asked—what was it that it wasn't? To which her reply was:—"Never mind! . . . However, I'm glad if you're not disgusted. I thought perhaps you were." She declined assistance in getting the bicycle into deposit, and he went into the house, to be greeted by his mother from an upper landing with:—"Is that you, Fred? . . . I thought it was. Nancy's coming, instead of to-morrow. I hope you won't mind." He answered the question first, with:—"Why on earth *should* I mind?" and then said casually that he had seen her—she was outside—and went on into the drawing-room. The dachshund followed him, having run to the first sound of his latchkey so as to prevent anything irregular. The cat rose for a moment on his entry, for civility; then stretched herself, and pivoted to a convenient attitude for getting a little more sleep. He read the paper.

Nancy passed straight upstairs to Mrs. Carteret in her bedroom, and was greeted with:—"Of course I didn't wire, dear

child! Why should I? . . . Well—no doubt it's nicer to have you and Fred separate. It goes farther. . . . You've seen him?"

The young lady did not at once reply verbally. She nodded; quite six times, perhaps more. Then she said:—"Oh yes, I've seen him. But . . ."

"But what?" said Mrs. Carteret.

"But something's the matter."

"Something's the matter?" A terrified look came upon her face.

Nancy saw it, and wished she had not blurted out her impression like that. She ought not to have forgotten the dread that always hung upon her friend's life. But remember!—it was nearly two years since the tragedy. "Not *that*, Madrina dear," said she quickly, using a name that she had found for her some while since, and that had caught on. "At least, I don't think it was that—not what you thought it was."

Mrs. Carteret's alarm died down. "I think not either," said she, "by the way he spoke from downstairs just now. But I am always fancying the news will come that they have found it."

"Some news about *him*?" Nancy wanted to soften away the grisliest interpretation of her words.

But she would not have it. "No. Found the body!" said she, firmly. "Well—it would be something to know."

"I don't think it can be that," said Nancy. "He would have told me. There was plenty of time." Then she cast about to find something that would do to account for Fred's expression and could find nothing better than:—"Perhaps Mrs. Snaith's baby's dead. They do die like a shot sometimes, poor little parties! I hope that isn't it."

"I hope not, I'm sure," said Mrs. Carteret. She at least had no suspicion of the facts, to help her son to a full disclosure of them. The story is not so confident about Nancy. She may have had one of her shrewd inspirations, even from that short interview with him at the gate.

She certainly had one during dinner. For when they had left Fred to himself and his cigar, and the drawing-room door had been closed—after a certain amount of obstructiveness from Liebig, who refused to go in or out—she turned to her companion, saying:—"There, did you see?"

"See what? Oh, he's no worse than usual."

"I didn't mean the dog. I meant *him*. I'm sure something's the matter."

"Do you know, I think you must be mistaken. I'm sure he would have said."

"Not with *me* there!" Nancy shook her head continuously, with a firm conviction. "Of course he would have told if it had been the baby. That's why I asked him." This referred to an early phase of dinner, when she had pressed for information on the point, eliciting from Fred that the said baby was all right, but very powerful and self-willed; with particulars of a visit he and his father had paid him on Sunday morning.

Then she wanted to say more, but had to stop while Jane brought in coffee and died away. Then Mrs. Carteret wanted an end to a fractured sentence. "You're the last . . . something . . . ?" said she.

"I'm the last person he would like to know anything about it. *If I'm right!* I mean, at least, I'm *one* of the last people."

Mrs. Carteret said, with her beautiful eyes fixed thoughtfully on her young friend:—"I wonder what the child means." This treated Nancy as out of hearing. She went on as to listening ears:—"You've got it into your foolish noodle that the boy's in love again. Isn't that it?"

"Well—it is and it isn't. . . . Do you know, I'm sorry I spoke?"

"Why do you suppose Fred would so particularly object to your knowing about his love-affairs? Because of Cintra, I suppose."

"No—Cintra doesn't come in. . . . Well, I don't know. Cintra *does*, in a sense. *If I'm right.* Only mind you, it may be all nonsense!" She seemed extremely anxious to lay the utmost possible stress on her own fallibility.

Mrs. Carteret looked uncomfortable. "Why did you change round?" said she. "I mean—what sense does Cintra come in, in?" A painful possibility had crossed her mind.

The girl's cheeks were changing colour, making her eyes all the brighter. "Oh dear!" said she. "I *am* so sorry I spoke. . . . Why, of course! Because it would make Cit seem to have been in the right all along. You remember that day when we biked over to lunch—the first time we saw Lucy Hinchliffe . . . I told you . . . ?"

"Oh dear yes. I remember perfectly."

"And how Cit flew into a towering passion on the way home. I told you after, didn't I . . . ?"

"Yes. But how does that . . . ?"

"How does that bring Cit in? Oh, don't you *see*?"

"Yes—no! No, I don't." The painful possibility was growing. She said after a pause, quickly and uneasily:—"Nancy dear, would you mind telling me at once exactly what you mean?"

Nancy rushed the position. "Why—see how continually Fred is at The Cedars. Every Saturday afternoon and the whole of Sunday." Then she saw the effect of her words, and would have recalled them. "Oh, Madrina . . . darling! See—see what I've done! And it may be all a mistake, all the time."

For Mrs. Carteret, hurriedly putting down the coffee-cup she was raising to her lips—and it tinkled with the shaking of her hand—had turned very pale and sunk back in her chair. Nancy was beside her in an instant, caressing her and trying at any cost to get her words unsaid. It was *her* fault. What right had she to think such a dreadful thing? She ought to have known it would be impossible for Fred to . . . to take some course, presumably, which did not lend itself to description in words, as she hung fire over it and said, in preference:—"Of course it was what put Cit's back up so two years ago that set me on thinking it." And seemed to find in that refuge from her own sinister conviction.

But it was not a very safe haven. Mrs. Carteret recovered her customary self-possession, saying:—"Perhaps Cintra was right after all, and wiser than we thought. These things *do* happen, we know. And I don't see how they can be avoided, unless every man who marries an attractive woman divorces all his male friends."

Nancy appeared anxious to deal out blame justly. "I can't see that Cit was right in one thing," she said. "I do *not* believe that Lucy Snaith is half as *minxish* as she made out. And a good deal turns on *minxishness* in a thing of this sort." The gravity of the speaker was as great as if she had been moving the reduction of a Bishop's salary. Mrs. Carteret could not help smiling at it, she called her a dear goose, and left the subject:—"Don't let's jump at conclusions, before we know," said she. And Nancy said no more.

Fred was a long time over that cigar—longer than usual. He apologised, saying it wouldn't pull. This may have been that he wished to minimise Nancy; so his mother thought. His personal criticisms of her had no weight in this; it was merely the fact of her having been so nearly his sister-in-law. Possibly it was the same feeling which prompted her to go away to bed, less than twenty minutes after his appearance. Then the son

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and mother were left alone, and he knew by her manner that in a moment she would speak of the thing that was preying on his heart. The way in which she said the one word "Fred!" was enough for this.

"What—Mammy dearest?" He was looking through the window that stood open on the balcony, letting in the summer night; so that his back was towards her. He did not turn round.

She went nearer to him and threw an arm round his neck—drew his face round to her lips and kissed it. "Tell me the whole truth, darling boy!" said she. "Tell me everything. Come out and tell me in the dark."

It was easier somehow, that way, and he was grateful to her. They went out on the balcony, which was wide enough for chairs. Two were there, but he preferred leaning over the balustrade. "You know that I shall have to go away?" said he. So confident was he that the thing had come to her knowledge, though how and why it should have done so was a mystery to him, that he jumped at once beyond the subject to its consequences.

"Suppose we talk about that afterwards. Tell me first exactly what has happened. Remember—I don't *know*! I only guess." She felt that it was risky, this pressing for particulars. But it was best to be courageous. For, after all, she must know in the end.

"What *has* happened?" said he, dreadingly. "Strictly speaking, nothing has happened. But I cannot remain here. My life must pass somewhere else. I came here to-day meaning to tell you how things stand."

"Yes—that is right. Tell me more." She was much easier at heart for these few words.

"How can I live near my friend, when his wife is . . . what she is . . . to me? How can I deprive him of her, when he is . . . Charley? I can only *go*—get away out of sight. And yet . . ."

"And yet what?"

"And yet, if I do that, how shall I have behaved to *her*?"

His mother began to doubt if her ease of mind had not been premature, after all. "I thought you said," said she, "that nothing had happened."

"I see what you mean. Oh no—nothing has happened, in that sense. All the blessed commandments are intact. But I must begone, for all that. And how much the happier will *she* be, by my departure?"

"You foolish boy!" Her voice had real relief in it, this time, however. "Look here now! Suppose you come away from that paling, and sit down. . . . Yes—like that—opposite me. Now tell me, please, exactly what *has* happened. No nonsense, you know!"

It was rather difficult to tell a story that really was poet's work, or dramatist's, as if it had been an inventory of goods, or an attestation before a Court of Justice, or anything with tactile values in it for the practical mind to lay hold of. But Fred succeeded fairly well, his hesitations often explaining points his attempts at lucidity had only obscured. He was a little taken aback that his mother should say "Of course!" and "Naturally!" more than once when he conceived that he was narrating something peculiar and recondite, foreign to human experience. Especially so, when having carried his narrative up to that final interview with Lucy on the Sunday night, he had flinched from its climax, preferring to leave it to the imagination of his hearer. For he was quite disconcerted when she supplied it for him, saying:—"And then I suppose you kissed her?" with perfect calmness, as if such trespasses were written on every page of human history.

She continued, as though a result so inevitable called for no further comment:—"Well then! What did she say after that?" and seemed to expect a continuation of the story.

But he said:—"Nothing. We went out on the lawn, to the others. In fact, we have hardly spoken since. She was only just coming down to breakfast when Charley and I went off to catch the nine-thirty. Of course I have been at my diggings ever since then."

Mrs. Carteret almost laughed. "What an absurd boy my son is!" said she. "Just fancy! He kisses a lady, and because she lets him, he takes for granted that she is ready to throw her husband and her baby over—and the world's good opinion, whatever it's worth—and to give herself away to him! Do you suppose now, soberly and seriously . . ."

Fred struck in. "Yes, I do suppose, soberly and seriously. I mean, that what I know, I know. We understand each other. Think of what I had just told her. All I had said, mind you, was about herself, and I was only keeping back the name. It is all quite clear."

Mrs. Carteret considered. Fred's tale to Lucy had been, it appeared, of how a crazy passion for some woman, unnamed, had broken his allegiance to Cintra Fraser, and she had pressed him

to say who this woman was. Then see!—all in a moment she finds herself caught in his arms, and kissed. What was an impartial bystander to think? On the whole, Fred's mother inclined to the belief that this unfortunate development was mutual, and moreover that that young lady had been perfectly conscious of the position for some time past. But she knew that any suggestion to this effect would only offend her son's chivalrous instincts. So she held her tongue. She saw that any declaration of the feeling that was creeping over her of detestation for the woman who had enslaved him, would only destroy whatever chance remained of weaning him of his infatuation before it led to absolutely disastrous consequences. She determined not even to reason with him on the subject. She felt, however, that the more clearly she kept before him how grievous a wrong he was doing to the old friend whom he all the while professed to love, the better was the chance of his shaking off his madness, and finding a resource against it in a healthier love for . . . there her thoughts paused a moment before adding:—"For a better woman than Lucy Snaith." The words came to her mind though, distinctly. And with them an image of the girl and her eyes; such a one as Browning chooses to present of the woman at whose door he lays all the mischief in that poem of his—you know which? Most of its readers pity her least of the three.

"Do you know, darling boy," said she, after a silence, "what I am thinking of? I am thinking of poor Charles Snaith when he comes to know of this. . . ."

Fred gave a moan as of sudden pain. "Mother—Mother!" he cried. "For God's sake—*don't!*"

"But it must come."

"That's the worst of it."

"It must come, and you will have to face it."

"I shall have to face it. . . . Charley!" As the name came from his lips, without any place for it in his speech, his mother could hear in its utterance what it meant to the speaker. What memories of school and college, of boyhood from childhood, manhood till this saddest hour for both! Such memories were upon him now, night and day. And the hardest to bear of all were those of the early time.

She knew the cruelty of her words, and that they must cut him to the soul. But she knew also how hopeless would be any attempt to make him see this idol of his as she saw her. She was playing for the only chance, in thus dragging him face to

face with his treason against his friend. And her silence about the woman who was causing it was keeping her in touch with him, while free speech of her thought of her might make them drift apart. Better anything than that. "Have you thought of his child, left without a mother? Think of the tale that father will have to tell him—or to keep him in the dark about—when he comes to be of an age to understand."

"Mother, for Heaven's sake have pity! You cannot make things better. Do not make them worse!"

"I am speaking only of what must be, that you may not deceive yourself. That baby will in a few years be old enough to ask—why he has no mamma, like other children. And his father will have but one answer to give him. He will have to say:—'It was because my tried friend, who was dearer to me than my brother, played me false and left me broken-hearted, in a home that both of us had made his, as much as mine.'"

"No—no—no no! A thousand times—no! It shall never come to that." He choked back excitement that would have been relief, and his effort only made what he sought to conceal more manifest.

How his mother pitied him! But she had the right of it—to press her views of the case, cost him what it might. She was sure of that. Whichever side he looked at it from, he must needs go half-mad over it. Well—at whatever cost to himself in pain present or to come, let him choose the course freest from dishonour! She almost felt her breath fail her as she put to him the unanswerable question:—"But how can you avoid it?" It seemed too cruel.

"How?" he repeated. "I told you. I shall have to go away. My life must be passed somewhere else. I know it now." Then more quietly, but rather as though the strain of his excitement had exhausted him:—"Charley shall never know the reason why."

Stop it at that! That was Mrs. Carteret's feeling. Beware of a single word of the position of that woman—she was already "that woman," you see!—while his life passed somewhere else! Could she do anything, here and now, to make this resolution of his a fixed one? Yes, she could. And if she saw the opportunity, she would.

A short lull followed his last words, and seemed to ratify them. Then she said quietly:—"Yes—that will be the best way. Have you thought where you can go, at all?"

"No. I haven't thought. I don't know. As far as possible."

"Must it be so far? I'm sorry."

"Does it make any difference?"

"It might, if an idea that crossed my mind . . ."

"I said I hadn't thought—but perhaps I had. In a vague kind of way. I had a notion yesterday that Norway would do. But I think I prefer Canada or the States. Possibly San Francisco. What was your idea?"

"Oh, nothing! A freak of fancy. But it would be out of the question. San Francisco would be too far."

"Too far for what? What was your idea?"

But she wanted the same idea to occur to him. So she only answered, rather wide of the mark apparently:—"The great trouble to me would be that you would be so far out of my reach. Anyhow, the nearer the better."

"In England won't do. I must be far enough off to forget."

"Then we have to bid each other good-bye. There are no two ways. If anywhere in England would have done . . ."

"Quite impossible! How could I cry off going to see Charley, if there were only a day's journey between us?"

"I see. It is so. I *could* have come to you, though, that way. But, however—what *must* be . . .!"

He finished the sentence for her:—"Must!" Then the suggestions she had been throwing out bore fruit. For he said suddenly:—"Do you know what I was hoping you would say your idea was? . . . No? Well then—that you would come too. Do, Mammy dearest! Shut the house up and come away. . . . But I'm afraid that wasn't your idea."

"It was very vague—my idea!" She half admitted the idea too—so Fred thought—even though she shied off it a moment later. "Oh no! I am too old for travelling about, at my time of life!" Her manner said it would never do to think any more of that! And all the time she was hoping that her son would not be put off by it.

If anything it made him more in love with the plan, or seemed to do so. He derided the idea of her being too old for travelling. She *must* come; he could not leave her alone, and go away he must. He was dominated at the moment by an eagerness to escape from the position of a traitor. All the foreground of his mind was filled with the image of his friend, and the ruin and misery he was going to cause him. It had power for the moment

to banish even the thought of that interview under the stars—of Lucy herself, so near him. But only for the moment.

In her secret heart his mother rejoiced at this. Once committed to a course that would take him out of the zone of "that woman's" influence, he would not go back upon it. Least of all would he do so if his resolve to go abroad was confirmed by the knowledge that his mother, at his own invitation, was warehousing valuables and buying an outfit to accompany him. If it came to that, it would be the seal or stamp on his compact with himself to place his friend's interest above his own, even at the cost of the woman's happiness. Indeed, why should Mrs. Carteret fret about that? As if Mistress Lucy did not know perfectly well what she was about, all the time!

It was safest, now that Fred had committed himself definitely to leaving the country, to say nothing that would revive the question. She took it for settled that it would be so, but had just enough misgiving on the point of whether he would change his mind, to keep off anything that would give him an opportunity of doing so. In fact, she thought it would be best to change to an entirely different topic, and there was one that was still sure, as between her and her son, to cancel every other.

"By the by," said she, "I never told you. I had a letter from Mrs. Orpen. She is going to be married."

"What—Orpey Porpey! Who's she going to marry?"

"Foolish boy—fancy your asking that! Why—you were here when she brought him here! Then, you know."

"They didn't say anything about getting married, then."

"Why should they? But one has one's eyes, and can see things. I thought them very transparent. Mrs. Threepwell she'll be."

"I recollect him. Chop-jawed humbug! But what has kept them hanging about so long? That's a year ago—two years nearly."

"I suppose they have waited for him to have the mastership."

"I thought he had that, a long time ago. Have they been going on without a headmaster?" It was a sign of how Time was chilling the memory of the vanished man that Fred could ask this question without any vivid consciousness of the degree to which it must grate on his mother. He heard it, an instant later, in the sound of her voice.

"I knew it must be, sometime," said she. "They put it off as long as they could. There was some sort of temporary arrangement . . . in case . . ." A contingency hard to

she had stopped her, but she recovered in a moment. "Only—why should I shrink from speaking of it? Why should I mind who knows?"

"I'm not sure, Mother dear, that I quite understand."

"I know that he was killed. Yes—murdered!"

Fred protested in an undertone. "You are convinced." For he could not acquiesce outright in the claim to knowledge.

"If you like. It is only one word instead of another. So long as it means that I am sure about it, I do not care which you call it. I am convinced."

Fred had nothing to say. After all, do we not hang men, every day, because a jury is convinced? How often do we *know*—even as well as we know geometrical truth—that a murder has been committed?

Mrs. Carteret continued, quietly enough, but with the same sound in her voice:—"I said the same, thought the same, when Mr. Trymer told us we could not expect letters of administration in less than seven years, as there was no absolute proof of your uncle's death."

This referred to a subject of frequent contention—or at least argument—between the mother and son; the deadlock which the strange circumstances had occasioned in the disposition of Dr. Carteret's worldly affairs. His will had been opened and read, without a word of protest from any relative, some six months after his disappearance. But, as is usual in such cases, administration had been refused until definite proof was forthcoming of his death.

Fred immediately utilised his mother's reference to it as an engine of Hope. "Yes—and for once the Court of Chancery was right. There is no proof. And not only that, but the circumstances are such that it is almost morally certain that proof of his death would have been forthcoming—*certainly* would if he had been, as you think . . ."

"Murdered." She supplied the word. It was scarcely ever spoken but by herself.

"Exactly. Now, Mother dear, only look at this. Improbable as it seems that a sane responsible man like Uncle Dru should voluntarily absent himself from his employment and occupations, friends, relatives—everything and everybody—is his doing so one whit less improbable than that he should be . . . made away with . . ."

"I understand."

". . . And the deed so successfully concealed that no clue to

the mystery has come to light—in over a year and a half, isn't it?—yes! For my part, I think the last far the most improbable.”

Mrs. Carteret only shook her head. “We gain nothing by going over and over it, Fred dear!” said she. But something had been gained, for her, by the revival of the painful subject. For the stress of it had dragged Fred’s mind away from his own trouble, and kept him from recanting his resolution to take the only step to escape from the tragedy that seemed to be hanging over him if he remained in his present surroundings. And he had bound himself, as it were, to this course by his urgent invitation to her to accompany him.

This long talk of theirs had lasted till past midnight, and Mrs. Carteret had reason on her side in saying that go to bed they must, or Heaven knew when they would be up in the morning. Fred departed downstairs, and she said good-night affectionately to him and sought her own quarters on the floor above.

She had to pass Nancy’s door. It opened furtively and let its occupant’s voice through, saying in a whisper:—“Is he gone down?”

“Yes, dear, he won’t hear you. But let me in and I’ll tell you.” She passed into the room, thinking what an injustice this girl did herself in screwing her hair up so tight all day, when such a nocturnal deluge was possible. “You’ve never been to bed, you naughty child.”

“No—I’ve been waiting to hear. Was it what we thought?”

“I’m afraid so. I mean, I’m afraid it’s gone—rather far!”

“Oh, not too far!—not too far to back out?”

Mrs. Carteret wondered, as she looked at the blameless hazel eyes, grave in their surrounding of loose hair, how much their owner meant her to deny. She decided that “No, dear—not too far to back out,” would cover all contingencies, and be perfectly true.

The girl looked relieved, but perhaps would have been put to it to say why. “I see,” she said. “But have they got to kissing point? Did you get that out of him?”

Mrs. Carteret nearly laughed, though indeed she was in no mood for laughter. “I got that out of him,” she said. “But then, you see, I’m his mother.”

“All right. I’m an outsider. I won’t ask questions.” She seemed to repent of this, though. For, a moment later, she said:—“I must ask one. Does poor Nosey know about this?”

THE OLD MADHOUSE

"Mr. Snaith? Oh dear no! How should he?"

"She might tell him. I should if it was me. Not to would be fbs. . . ."

"It isn't you, child! And it couldn't be you, in the nature of things." There was no chance of a smile over Nancy's method, now. And her voice hardened to say:—"She will easily keep him in the dark. She can manage the position."

"Oh, Madrina!"

"I'm sorry it is so, dear! But you will find I am right. It will prove so in the end. She's that sort. But of course I shall not breathe a hint of that to my boy. I would sooner he credited me with a good opinion of her. If I stroke him the wrong way, the least little bit, it will spoil all. . . . Yes, dear, I have a plan. But it has its drawbacks."

"Its drawbacks?"

"I'll tell you to-morrow. Go to bed."

"No—tell me now. Bother the clock!"

"It has one big drawback. I shall have to leave my *figlioccia* behind." This byname of course resulted from Madrina, first used by Nancy because it sounded well, not because it was applicable.

"Then you are going away somewhere—going with him. I see."

Mrs. Carteret nodded. "That's it! *Somewhere*," said she. "Anywhere, somewhere else—New Zealand, if you like—to get him out of the way of that woman. Don't look so shocked, dear, but go to bed. I'll tell you to-morrow."

Nancy took no notice of this, but cogitated. "It's a good move," said she. "Of course I wish it could be done any other way. Because one doesn't pick up stray extra godmothers, in every bush. I don't like it, but I shall have to lump it."

"It isn't absolutely settled. Only, it may be the other way. He may shy off going if I don't stick to it. You see, he made me promise to go, so he can't back out, as long as I don't."

"Oh yes—I quite understand. You made him make you promise to go away with him, of his own accord, and now he's done it and can't help himself. Very good idea!"

"Yes—you put it very nicely. Now, dear, go to bed and we'll talk about it to-morrow." Nancy wanted to go on talking; but Mrs. Carteret was firm, and departed.

Fred, left to himself, promptly wavered. So long as Charley was kept before the eyesight of his mind, his conscience told him

that the only course open to him was to fly from his temptation. The moment he was free to indulge in memories of Lucy—her glance, her voice, her touch above all in that fatal moment in the garden—they came back upon him in a throng and overwhelmed him. The intoxication of her identity seized on every fibre of his being. And all the more that, in spite of doubt thrown by his mother he held sacred his conviction of the meaning of her passive acquiescence in his caress. It came of his placing his idol on so high a pedestal. A commonplace woman might see her way to a chance kiss from an adorer; might enjoy it as a transgression, and exult in its wicked secrecy. But not Lucy, she was above that sort of thing. Her action meant "Do not suppose you are alone. Do not suppose your love is unreturned. Our relations can never go beyond those of dear friends, because of the height of my ideals, and no doubt yours. But I can tell no lies. I can make no pretence to a frigid indifference to the passion you have as good as confessed to me, and you are at liberty to draw your own inferences about my feelings towards my husband. The path of duty is strewn with thorns for both of us, but if I walk barefoot upon it without complaining, you will have to do so too. Beyond this, if your conscientious scruples condemn as iniquitous the amount of subterfuge needed to conceal a relation that *my* morality excuses, I will thank you to keep them in abeyance. What is *your* conscience, that it cannot face an indictment mine does not shrink from?" That was Fred's interpretation of her attitude, anyhow. Not that he could sort it out as the story has endeavoured to do for him, conscious of its verbosity. It presented itself clearly to him nevertheless, in a flash, just as a phrase of music summarises what would need a volume to tell.

There was an obscurity, though, in one note of *his* music. How came a creature so pure and perfect, so flawless as this idol of his, to have wedded his friend for the only reason possible to such a one as she—an almost divine insight into the soul which Providence, for Purposes of Its Own, had thought fit to enshrine in a casket which was, to say the least, prosaic? For Fred, who would not have had Charley altered by so much as a pin's point, could not shut his eyes to his individualities. How then came Lucy Hinchliffe, having once seen beyond this mere material *compages* or shell of the body, to be able to revolt against, or disallow, the actual Charley, the inner soul or self of it? Fred was forced to ascribe one imperfection to his idol. She had—for *his* sake—wavered in her allegiance to his friend.

She was human, so far; otherwise, divine. But was it not possible that she had been misled by a bad influence?—a plausible theory. He had frequently discerned before this a sinister characteristic in her august mother, and had discussed it with Charley, who had seemed to acquiesce in the correctness of his views. Both had accepted the description of the lady—"a regular old stager"—as applicable, and it had seemed to convey to them more meaning than the mere words show on the surface. Now, the suspicion at work in Fred's mind that, little as his own mother had said, she was laying all the blame at Lucy's door, made him rather glad of the presence of the old stager in the background as a scapegoat. It would make his mother—of whom Fred was frightened—much more lenient in her heart towards the cause of her son's distraction. And after all, there was that story of the noble relative! But it had never been discussed or hinted at before Lucy—oh dear no!

He found that he could account for her readiness to accept Charley for her husband by a composition of two forces, acting on her inexperienced mind before her marriage. One the persistence of a lover for whom it was impossible to feel no affection at all—for was he not Charley?—the other the untiring stress of a dominant parent, ceaselessly working to an end, an end dear to the old staggers of her class. Think of that coronet! Think what a Countess her daughter would have made! To Fred, this last consideration seemed to palliate almost any amount of worldliness in so old a stager. He wondered more at her daring so much on so small a chance. Then, who could say what callousness Lucy may not have shown to other would-be lovers? She evidently had never known the meaning of the word "love," or she—with all that beauty and purity of character, mind you!—never could have deliberately married, to gravitate down to indifference in less than a couple of years.

But the oddity of it was that Charley's own devotion to her seemed unchanged. At least, it had only lulled as all men's may in the end; for life at high pressure is impossible. Why had not her indifference reacted on his ardour? It would have made matters so much easier—Fred thought—if Charley could only have contributed his share to their estrangement. As it was, every affectionate word to his wife, every little turn or action that spoke of his confidence in her, fairly made Fred wince, to think of the precipice so near by, and the inevitable catastrophe. As he paced to and fro in his room that night, conscious that he would be inaudible above, with a floor be-

tween, his mother's words:—"I am thinking of poor Charles Snaith when he comes to know of this"—came back to him in the middle of an undisguised dream of what might have been his, if only . . . and that reservation brought the same thought before him now. That terror would not leave him free to dwell on the sweetness of the poison that was current in all his veins. It would come again, and yet again. Its sting could never be withdrawn from the heart of his conscience, except at the cost of an exile that would have to dwell on such scanty memories of a banquet half-tasted, a cup snatched from his lips, as life in a new world elsewhere might leave him.

And how about her? After all, had he a right to absent himself from her in this way? If he had kept his passion for her secret, and fled in time, then he might have said to himself:—"I have placed my friend's happiness above my own, and the woman I have loved in vain has at least never known of my love, through any disloyalty of mine." How could he say so now?

Then his thoughts ran to the asking of a question he shrank from answering. Was he to see her again? He must, and yet he dared not. What would become of all his resolutions if he and she had to say farewell, face to face? It would be hard enough to depart in any case, even under the sanction of an exchange of letters, declaring and setting forth that course as the only justifiable and reasonable one; how much harder to tear himself away from her living presence, each knowing the other's heart! And yet—was he not pledged to the one course or the other—pledged to begone, in any case? It was he himself, of his own free will, that had sought for and obtained his mother's consent to accompany him.

Then another nightmare idea came to persecute him. Suppose all things arranged and a plausible excuse forthcoming for his departure, and the embarrassment—or worse—of a *tête-à-tête* with Lucy barred by any fortunate conjunction of circumstances, was he to vanish from her without so much as a word by letter. And if he wrote, what was to prevent Charley seeing the letter? Of course if she saw the envelope first, all would be safe, for she would know his handwriting. But how write such a letter as his pen's point would yearn for, on the one—though the odds were a hundred to one in its favour—of its reaching her eyes first? For if the hundred and first chance came about, and Charley's eyes first caught sight of his well-known script—how then? Why, he could almost hear his

friend's voice:—"Hullo!—what's the fun? Letter from Fred to the missus, a mile and a half long! *Must* open this!" And then—fancy the sequel! How at first he would think it a joke, and would carry it to his wife for a needed explanation. And then—how? He turned sick as he pictured to himself one hideous contingency after another.

He could not sleep—that was certain—until he had seen some way out of this labyrinth of difficulties. He could explain his sudden departure, though on different lines, to her and to her husband. But then he must have some security that no eyes but hers should read what he would write for them, and them alone. The only possibility would be to delegate it to someone to deliver into her hands—some trustworthy person. But there was no one; no one but Charley himself. Charley would not open a letter entrusted to him. But how hand him such a one, and look into his honest face the while? Fred shuddered at the bare thought. No, he must give up that idea of the letter. There was absolutely nothing for it—no human creature common to both who could take charge of it. Not one he could rely on, at least! Of course there was Elbows, but she was out of the question. . . .

Well—to be very exact—why was she? Fred wanted at first to pooh-pooh Elbows as an absurd hypothesis, considered as a letter-carrier. But she was not so easily eliminated. He tried at first to justify his position by an answer which he all the while knew to be absurd. Because Elbows would carry the letter to her sister Mrs. Lomax, and between the two of them and a hot-water kettle its contents would be got at and read—copied perhaps—before it was stuck to again and passed on to Lucy. He knew better than to run that risk! This justification failed because he knew in his heart that, whatever Nancy's defects might be, duplicity was not one of them. Was not her shortcoming rather an offensive veracity, an unfortunate literalness of mind, tending to place her in the odious position of a teller of truths? Oh no—she was quite square, if you came to that! After all, for a thing of this sort, you might do worse than Elbows.

Besides she was absolutely the only person to the fore whom he knew as a visitor at The Cedars. He had heard of her being in the house only the last time he entered it, when paying a visit, by request, to the nursery. The baby had expressed his satisfaction at another visit he had received the day before, from a lady friend, who had brought him a bright yellow balloon, and

inflated it as his request. Her name, he had said, was Miss Fraser, and he had only allowed her to depart at the end of a long visit, when she had given an undertaking to come again next week, and bring some other object of interest capable of inflation, say a pig. At least, an allegation to that effect was made by his nurse, in a Parliamentary formula suited to question-time, asking him did he make statements to that effect, and was he by nature precious and even divine? He had, it is true, followed precedents and made no reply; for surely the most unobservant student of the Debates must have noticed that, in Parliament, question-time never is answer-time. But Fred had accepted a silence, with hiccups, as confirmatory of his nurse's imputations, though he wondered whether the creature who was hanging on to him by his beard was alive to any fact whatever, even that he was Master Charles. Anyhow, Nancy was evidently still a worshipper of her friend's beauty, although the latter had not spoken of her to him. Possibly because she, Nancy, would have involved reference to Cintra.

He was far advanced in a night of speechless wakefulness, and feverish imaginations, when the chance of using Nancy as a means of getting a letter into Lucy's own hands gave him a factitious ease of mind, and allowed a troubled sleep to supervene, ending in an unconditional surrender to Somnus, who caught Unrest at a disadvantage, and strangled him.

CHAPTER XXVI

CHARLES saw nothing of Fred next day, as he went straight away from the office at six o'clock to his home at The Cedars. Fred had evidently stayed on to lunch at his mother's, or he would have put in an appearance at the usual hour at the lunch rendezvous.

By the time Charles arrived at The Cedars, all recollection of his conversation with his wife in the carriage coming home from the play had vanished, in the course of a night's rest and a day's business. He had not thought himself called upon to put two and two together, in connection with what Mr. Moring had told him of the source of Mr. McMurrough's information that he had embodied in that paragraph. The mere aroma of a conclusion that a person one has absolute faith in has been playing fast and loose with veracity, is sufficient to scare the investigator from a clue he would follow keenly if he saw his way to convicting his cook, his laundress, even his medical or legal adviser, of telling fibs. The fact that Lucy was to his knowledge the only person in that quarter who could possibly have given Mr. McMurrough his particulars was proof positive that he had got them somewhere else.

Moreover, his mind on the journey home was fully employed on the speculation whether the first person he found at his domicile on arriving would or would not be Fred. He was inclined to answer in the affirmative, and was distinctly disappointed when Tom the gardener, trimming the lawn-edge in the front garden with shears, replied to his enquiry whether Mr. Carteret had come, cautiously with all reserves:—"Can't say I've seen him myself, Sir." The answer he expected was that Fred had come by the previous train.

He was pleased that his wife should share his annoyance at the non-arrival of his friend. She came in late, after him, and her first words were:—"What!—you haven't brought him?" To which his reply was another question:—"Has no letter come?" For a premonitory letter to the house was more probable than one to himself in town, and would be sure to be sent to its mistress.

She jumped to a conclusion. "His mother's ill," she said.

"It must be that. Nothing else would have kept him. . . . No—no letter's come." The last words were for Charles. Otherwise, she spoke to herself.

"We shall get a letter in the course of the evening—you'll see." Charley had not a shadow of misgiving of anything amiss. As a blindfold man walks calmly on the edge of a precipice, he trod his path of life with a serene assurance. Was he not a happy man, with such a wife, such a friend, and—his inner consciousness might add—such a son-and-heir! For he never paid a visit to his perfectly organized nursery without feeling that its succulent *raison-d'être* was all a well-constituted mind could desire. There was only one little pitted speck in that garnered fruit, the drawback that Charley had mentioned so diffidently to Mr. Trymer, in the hope that his profound experience would throw light upon it; namely, that the creature's mamma showed such a very half-hearted enthusiasm about it. Never mind! Charley felt as he contemplated his son-and-heir's fine masculine proportions when bathing, his delicate yet firm texture, and his unfathomable creases, that he was to be relied on to make good his own case with the most censorious of mothers. Still, he would have been much happier that Lucy's enthusiasm about her offspring should have equalled his own.

"Oh yes—of course we can go and pay that blessed baby a visit if you won't be content without it. Nancy Fraser—only you hate her, I know; so she never comes when you're here—always wants him awake." Charles, having made himself happy about Fred, had proposed this course before going to groom for dinner. She added:—"Perhaps on the whole he is nicer asleep."

Charles said:—"They are particularly ripping, asleep. So pulpy!" and led the way to the nursery.

"I wasn't thinking of that. I was thinking of the noise they make—at least this one does—whenever they want a thing and can't get it. And some other odious . . . peculiarities."

Charles looked amused, but made no further enquiry. Especially as at first it seemed as if admission to the nursery would be denied them. The nurse was not a person to trifle with; in fact, Charles had more than once remarked upon her truculent disposition. There were many people, he said, whom he would rather meet on a lonely road on a dark night than Gorhambury. She softened, however, when she found it was the master of the house who was seeking admission. "If you'd 'a said it was his pa!" said she. "On'y, however was I to know?" It then

appeared that whatever may have been the cause of Mrs. Gorhambury's desire to exclude the public from that nursery, it was not the fear of awakening Master Charles. "Wake him up!" said she, with evident pride. "Not if he don't choose. I don't say but what if you fired off a canning close to his head you might. But not with common hollering nor stamping."

"Now, *isn't* he a jolly little bloke, Luce?" said Charley, his whole soul going out in sympathy to the minute growing thing, the small type of humanity, its veriest minuscule. "Just look at him taking a snack—a snack in dreamland—and *then* say he isn't a jolly little bloke."

"Don't understand. Oh yes, I see! He thinks he's got his bottle—greedy little pig! He never thinks of anything but his bottle. . . . Yes, dear Charles! He's very interesting, and I suppose I ought to be more enthusiastic. But I've never been able to lose my head about children." She then seemed to think she ought to show a more definite interest in the baby, so she talked to the nurse about its teething; rather over her husband's head, as of a thing he, being a man, would not understand. But Mrs. Gorhambury responded very coldly to these confidential overtures, making perfunctory answers which tended to show that Master Charles knew quite well how to cut his teeth without any interference from the Faculty, which would be so good as to keep its horrid lancets out of his sweet ickle mouse. "But I thought babies always had to have their gums lanced," said this young mother. And in response to a curt correction from the nurse:—"I suppose I'm not up-to-date," with an indifferent drawl, as if it really did not concern her, one way or the other. Then she said, addressing Charles, who had no eyes for anything but his progeny:—"I needn't drag you away, since you're so engrossed. Only don't be late for dinner," and withdrew.

Charles felt he should like to sound Mrs. Gorhambury on the strange subject of this mother's indifference to her male issue. Experience like hers would be valuable in throwing light on the phenomenon; the only difficulty was how to approach it. Suppose then he were not to approach it at all, but to take its immediate proximity for granted—grasp it and chance the result.

"Not a very popular little card with his maternal parent?" said he.

"Beg your pardon!"

Try again—better luck next time! "I was saying, Mrs. Gor-

hambury, that Mrs. Snail doesn't seem to appreciate this—character."

But Mrs. Gorhambury's principles disallowed every form of epithet, and metaphorical speech of every class. "Was your meanin' Baby?" said she. Her tone promised concession as soon as the most elementary forms of speech were alone employed.

"Well—Baby was my meaning, certainly. I am bound to say he gives me the impression of a strong character. I may go so far as to say—a tentacular character." For he had rashly trusted a finger in a palm that was open, in a sense in which a half-blown rose is open, and its fingers had closed upon it with a giant's force.

"He won't let go," said Mrs. Gorhambury, with conviction.

"That's a pretty prospect for me," said Charles. "Doesn't he ever?"

"I never knew him to. Once he gets tight hold, there you are!" This held out a hope, however. For it was impossible that this child, whose diet was exclusively milk, should have absorbed its captives, like the boa constrictor or the cuttlefish. The nurse proceeded, suggesting extreme suddenness of action. "If you don't mean to it, you'll get free. But the minute you think, he'll tighten up." Charles recalled to mind the rock-limpet, who can be detached by one who simply acts, without the formation of an intent to do so; but who can read thought with ease. "We must have patience," he said. Meanwhile Master Charles slept deeply, profoundly, without breathing. Only the occasional suck at his dream-bottle betrayed life, visibly. There was an advantage about this; it compelled Charles to stop and talk to Mrs. Gorhambury, and he wanted to be compelled, in order that he might have the opportunity to decoy or persuade her into a clear expression of opinion about Master Charles's mamma's unnatural indifference to his fascinations. He returned to the charge, leaving his finger in a grip whose power was phenomenal, especially as it was that of a sleeping man not a year old. "Don't you call it rum, Mrs. Gorhambury?" said he.

Mrs. Gorhambury assumed a reserve that would have done credit to a sphinx putting up the shutters on Saturday night. "It is not for me," said she, "to be asking of no questions. Nor yet a answering of them. I know my place."

Charles knew he could not have wheedled a real Sphinx into revealing any official secret. But her responsible employers—

Zeus or the Graie, whichever it was—might have done so; and Mrs. Gorhambury was in receipt of a liberal salary, which came out of his pocket. Surely he was entitled to the advantages of her experience of babies and their mothers, which was, by her own showing, almost infinite. "Come, I say now!" said he. "Did you ever, in all your situations, come across a mamma that was such an unqualified cucumber towards her baby? And *such* a baby! Come now—I'll promise not to tell!"

The Sphinx relaxed. Yes—she had known cases of a similar indifference, the number thereof being small in comparison with that of the babies she had dry-nursed, but still considerable—not to be counted on the fingers of man; but fewer, for instance, than the toes of a centipede—while the latter number was as the swarm of gnats that at eventide out of the fens of Allen do arise, in Spenser. But, if you asked her, and she were to give way to an intense—indeed almost superhuman—love of Truth—she would be bound to admit that never in the course of her wide experience had she known an instance of such a baby as Master Charles being anything but what you might call a signosure to both its parents. She was perhaps tempted by an ambition towards rhetoric to make use of a word of which she misconceived the spelling. The story has thought it best to give her misconception.

"I expect it's only the missus's humbug," said Charles, a hope dawning, of an irresolute sort. "It's when I'm here—that's all!" For he had already begun to notice the natural wifely desire to disallow, disqualify, incapacitate, and cancel which marks the demeanour of any wife to any husband; of her own, that is. He didn't want to give Mrs. Gorhambury a chance to throw cold water on this theory, and the good woman seemed to be gathering up for a negative. So he deflected the conversation. "What's the Dying Poet?" said he. "In that box there!" He could not reach across for the box—he was too firmly held. But he had read its image and superscription.

Mrs. Gorhambury had to consider dignity. It does not do to show too lively a sympathy with children's toys in detail.

"Which was it you meant?" she asked. "Ho—that one? That's a Rubber Novelty Miss Fraser fetched, and he took notice quite beautiful. The Dyin' Poet."

"I know. You blow him up and he squeals. Just like a Poet! So it was Miss Nancy Fraser brought him that?" Charley was alive to the injustice of his former attitude towards

Elbows. "It was very jolly of her to bring him a Poet," said he.

"But Miss Nancy Fraser is—a—real—lady!" The effusiveness of the nurse's manner seemed to point to someone who was not. She went on to describe the notice taken of the Poet by Master Charles, which seemed to have resembled the notice a shark takes of a diver at his mealtimes. This shark's rapacity had been discouraged on account of the dye which occurs in rubber novelties. Charles fought shy of any discussion of who was, and who was not, a real lady. Mrs. Gorhambury was too valuable to quarrel with. He changed the topic again. He would be late for dinner unless this young party could be prevailed upon to let go.

It was managed somehow, but not without arousing the young party from his sleep. His indignation was too deep for words, probably; but language was still, for him, an untasted luxury. When his father, on his way down to dinner, twenty minutes later, looked in again for a moment to find how the riot had subsided, he was again a closed flower, breathless and moveless, the very image of sleep itself. That philosopher was wise who, being asked to choose the happiest lot, replied that he would soonest be a baby without ailments, sound asleep.

That Rubber Novelty made for Christian forgiveness in the mind of its receiver's father. Not that any act or deed of the donor called for forgiveness. But he and Fred had carried a nem: con: resolution, years ago, to the effect that no man could be expected to stand Elbows, and he had held fast to the tradition. No sane reason ever had been, or could be, assigned to it; but then young men are very prone to antipathies,—especially against young women—for no sane reason. They are perfectly fair and equitable in this matter of likes and dislikes, their loves being based on sound foundations as little and as much as their hates. It is just conceivable that Nancy's terrifying veracity, which with her was simply an automatic habit, had grated on some projection of the structure of one or both of these young men's *amour propre*. So the position at the date of the story was, that Nancy, caught by her propensity of admiration for beauty in her own sex, having become a devotee of Mrs. Carteret's, thereby maintaining her connection with her once-to-be brother-in-law, instead of following the natural drift-apart consequent on the dissolution of his engagement to her sister, had further—always under this influence of personal beauty—developed her relations with the wife of his friend.

She had, to crown these aberrations, become the victim of a blind and absorbing passion for their son, and her attentions had been, so far, well received. Charley, however, felt this evening that such an offering as that Poet, that squealed and collapsed when blown up, was too poorly acknowledged by mere acceptance. Besides, he had a strong bias towards sympathy with any form of deification of his son.

"I say, Luce," said he, across the table after dinner—the first meal they had had alone together for some days—"we really ought to do something civil about Miss Fraser. She comes all the way here on her bike, and never gets anything beyond her tea."

Lucy, beautiful but bored, said:—"Yes. But why to-night? I mean what makes you speak of it to-night?"

"More than any other night? Well—because I was visiting our Family in the nursery just now, and Mrs. Gorhambury showed me a present Miss Fraser had brought as an offering—to the Family. If you blow it up—the offering—it squeals and collapses. It's a Poet, I understand."

"Nancy Fraser is quite besotted about that infant. She said she could not get a Pig or an Elephant. They were all sold out. So she got him a Poet. Of course the child's too young to distinguish."

"Tried to stuff him into his mouth—Nurse Gorhambury says—and got blued all over. Pigs blue you, if you suck them, just as much as Poets. . . . Well—why not get her to dinner, to meet someone?"

"It means six at table, or her by herself." Charles did not see this, and his wife had to explain that it was impossible to ask a young single lady to meet (a) a single gentleman, (b) a married gentleman without his wife, (c) a married couple unless reinforced by some unit, because of making five at table. This unit was not achievable at a moment's notice, as Fred was no use if he was going abroad. Indeed, anyhow, it would never do to ask him to meet Nancy. How absurd of Charles to ask why not, when he knew how nearly she had been his sister-in-law! Charles conceded all points, but left the solution of these problems to a higher wisdom. "Nancy won't be here again till next week, so there's no immediate hurry," said his wife. He submitted that it would be as well to look alive, or Miss Fraser would be going out of town. He was thereon instructed that he need not fidget, as the matter should be maturely thought out, and the proper steps taken. "All

right, sweetheart!" said he, and snicked a cigar-point to smokeability.

But that little banquet for six, of whom Nancy was to be one, was never to come off.

Never was a man more unconscious of impending evil than Charles as he lighted that cigar, after his wife had retired, on the plea of a slight headache, to avoid its fumes. She had hitherto been very indulgent towards the weed, and no doubt would be so in time to come. But this evening she was the reverse of chatty, looked fatigued, was feeling the heat perhaps. Her husband was as solicitous about her as a devoted man could be—didn't want his cigar—would chuck it with pleasure, or smoke it later. How about smoking it later? Yes—he would do that, and come and sit with her in the drawing-room.

He would have been better pleased had she welcomed the alternative. The emphasis of her rejection of it, in favour of a prompt Vesta match, which she threatened to light herself if he did not, had very little sound of self-sacrifice in it. Her repeated injunctions to him on no account to hurry could not have been much more vigorous had his absence for twenty minutes been an object she really had at heart. That was impossible to Charles's mind, so it only occurred to him to be gratified at his wife's consideration for her husband. See how well Lucy pretended—for his sake! That was how he looked at it.

He began his cigar meaning to disobey her, and hurry. But hearing her at the piano made his mind easy. She would not find the time hang heavy on her hands in his absence, with music for a resource. Had the slight headache been sufficient to disallow the music, it might have been otherwise. What was that air she was playing? Oh—he knew—it was that Italian thing Fred was singing the other night. Very pretty thing. It had come out of the window of the drawing-room into the summer night, along the garden walk to his window of the dining-room, open for the heat, and had floated in with the breath of the honeysuckled air to mix with Charles's Havana and add to its soothing influence. The smoker thought there was something to be said for music after all.

He cut the Havana short because the music stopped, and made for the drawing-room. He found the player walking restlessly about the room. "You're looking very . . ." said he, and stopped.

"Very what?"

"Very so-so! It's the hot weather. You mustn't try to do so much."

She appeared impatient, even irritable. "I have been doing absolutely nothing at all," said she. Then she showed what was on her mind by a sudden question. "Why did you not go to Fred and tell him he must come?"

"Why—I was so late at the shop. And if I miss that train it's such a devil of a time before the next one. Besides, I expected to find him on the platform at Waterloo. Besides, if I had gone to the diggings ten to one I shouldn't have met him. Besides . . ."

She caught him up in the middle of his miscellaneous justifications—the sort one doesn't really think of at the time, but that come in very handy afterwards. "'Besides'—'Besides'—'Besides'—" said she, echoing his connecting link. "Why didn't you leave a letter for him at the Temple, to say he *must* come, from *me*?"

Charles had thought of doing so at breakfast, and was able to give a solid reason why he had not done so. "I knew he would come if he could," said he. "What use would it have been to us to know that he couldn't? He's sure to come tomorrow, anyhow."

Lucy was discomposed at no letter having already appeared. But, however!—the last post hadn't come yet. That was one consolation. . . . Hadn't it?—said Doubt. Charles had thought he heard the postman, five minutes since. Lucy rang for the butler to determine the point. Yes—the postman had been, as a prosaic fact. But he was a sorry postman, unworthy to bear the name of post, having brought no letter at all, unless indeed one from a correspondent of Mrs. Marsden in the kitchen could be considered a letter.

It was what Literature would describe as one of the ironies of the position that Charley was all this while rejoicing in his heart that his inseparable friend could command so warm a friendship in that of his wife. How if she had taken a reasonless dislike to him, as she might have done? Such things have been. His concern for her annoyance at Fred's possible departure for a holiday without an express send-off from The Cedars was secretly alleviated by his satisfaction that Fred's absence should be matter of so much concern for her. It had been one of the idle pastimes of the first year of his married life to choose mates for Fred, from among his wife's extensive acquaintance and his own more limited one. Why was Fred,

because his first choice had changed her mind and married a Public Analyst, to be debarred from a happiness such as his own? Lucy had entered keenly into the discussion of schemes of this sort at first, but had never given her consent to any one of them. Many she had scarcely entertained seriously, saying of one:—"What—a dowdy! Really, Charles, I had given you credit for better taste." Of another—"H'm—a passable figure! But her teeth are odious." Of another:—"Very solid and sensible, no doubt! But where are her eyes? What can you be thinking of, Charles?" And her husband, who was not at all in love with his selections, had discerned in this an echo of his own high estimate of his friend, to provide whom with a really suitable wife he taxed his imagination in vain. Nothing caught on, except a fictitious creature, of a beauty equal to his wife's, but with almost every detail diametrically opposite. Sunny golden hair and eyes emphatically blue were points to keep in mind; the blue not precisely washerwoman's blue, but—suppose we say?—the colour of the Mediterranean in pictures of Sicily at the Royal Academy.

Latterly, Lucy's interest in this match-making for Fred had flagged. Charley discerned, however, that this might easily be the case, without any diminution of the young lady's sisterly interest and esteem for his friend. In fact, he could see with the naked eye that there was no such diminution. Anybody could. Moreover, no suitable candidate for the position had appeared lately. Wait till Charley's sky-blue beauty dawned—so he thought to himself—and then see how Lucy's enthusiasm would revive!

"Don't you fret your hair off about him, Luce!" said he, consolatorily. "You'll see there'll be a letter from him by the first post to-morrow. Anyhow, I'll go to the diggings on my way to the shop, and I shall find him there. I'll send you a wire."

"No—don't trouble to do that.. He *cannot* go away without seeing—us." There was the faintest wavering before the last word. The substitution of it for "me" was too elusive to be noticeable. It was imperceptible to Charles, at any rate.

He cast about in his mind for a topic to change to. His mind was protesting against this cloud over her beauty; on *her* behalf, not his own. It was a satisfaction to him that she should make such a point of a farewell visit from Fred; but if it came to being a disquiet and a discomfort to her, that was another matter. What could he talk about? Oh, he knew! A thing that might get him a blowing-up, but a capital counter-irritation.

"Any more ghostesses?"

"Any more what?"

"Ghosts—spectral appearances—hallucinations . . ." He paused for an inclusive word; then, remembering the name and nickname of the first promoter:—"Grewbeerinesses—Klemmeries?"

"I think I know what you mean. No, I don't know of any. They may have seen things—the servants. But it doesn't follow that they would tell me." She spoke absently, as though pre-occupation made this a matter of secondary interest. "I can ask them, if you like."

"Oh no—it was only my rot." It seemed to him to be making the matter of too much importance. "I say, Luce, shall I tell you what I believe will happen? The old Doctor will turn up again, all alive and kicking, and then what will become of his ghost?"

"You mean we shall all look very foolish?"

"Well—yes!—I suppose I did." He seemed to think this was going too far, and added:—"Or not exactly that, perhaps. But we shouldn't hear of any more ghosts, for some time to come."

"That would be an advantage," said she, in the same absent manner. She seemed however, after reflection, to want to talk more purposefully, and said:—"I wish, Charles, you would stop talking nonsense, and would tell me seriously what you suppose has become of Dr. Carteret."

Charley was rather sorry to be brought face to face in this way with a problem which common consent was daily accepting as more and more insoluble. "Indeed, my love," said he, "I wish I could do so. But I am as much at sea as I was two years ago. Beyond what we all know, that he came to this house, and that not a soul can be found that will swear to having seen him after he left it, I know absolutely nothing."

"It is no use my asking how you know he ever left the house."

"Not in the least, if you expect an answer. I don't know. Nobody knows. But there can be no, direct proof that any man has ever left any house he has been seen in, except his being afterwards seen outside it. In this case nobody saw Dr. Carteret."

"What was that about a boy seeing him?"

"It all went the other way. The boy said he didn't see him, and he couldn't have been off seeing him if he had come out?"

"What made anyone think the boy saw him?"

"Only Mr. Grewbeer's experience that all boys were liars. This boy said he didn't see him. Mr. Grewbeer knew that this boy—and every other boy—was a liar. Therefore this boy saw Dr. Carteret. If he had said the contrary, it would have proved that Dr. Carteret was still in the house."

Lucy's beauty was no longer disquieted by her doubts about the causes of Fred's defection, and the non-arrival of an explanatory letter. A look, of terror almost, from some other cause was on her—a look that scarcely interfered with beauty; indeed some might have thought it enhanced it—as she said, hurriedly and under her breath:—"Do tell me why you are so convinced that he is no longer in the house!"

Charles looked at her with blank surprise. "No longer in the house!" he repeated.

"Yes—why? Why are you so convinced?"

"Convinced, sweetheart? How can I be anything but convinced? If fifteen workmen, more or less, at work on the repairs of a house, fail to notice the mortal remains of a man over six feet high and broad in proportion . . . That was what you meant, wasn't it?"

"Yes—I meant dead."

"Well then, I can only say that anyone not convinced that the man is outside the house, dead or alive, has a very strong organ of incredulity. Anyhow, I'm convinced."

"So I ought to be, I suppose. But did the men know they had to look for him?"

"My dearest love! Fancy their being told that if they came across corpses they were to mention them to the foreman! However, as a matter of fact I did say something to him about it myself."

"What did he say?"

"Said he would arrange for them to call particular attention, if such a one turned up. They were one and all such very respectable men, and had been at work for the firm for so many years, that I might rely on their keeping it in mind. More than that he couldn't say. He assured me at the end of the job that a very sharp lookout had been kept, and no dead party had come to light. Just think what it means—all those men stripping walls and cleaning paint and repairing perished woodwork, for two mortal months, and finding nothing!" Charley seemed to be amused by the foreman's attitude, but his wife did not respond.

"I was reading in to-day's paper," said she, "of some peasants in France, who dug up a body, and buried it again in case it should get them into a scrape."

Charles fairly laughed out. "My dearest girl," said he, "you've been dwelling on this fancy, which is all made up out of nothing, until it's got on your nerves. It's no wonder I say I should be glad to see the old boy again in the flesh, all other reasons apart."

"What do you suppose has become of him?" This very emphatically.

"My dear, I don't suppose. I can't suppose. All I know is—he isn't in the house."

"It's no use going over and over it." She was gathering up towards bedroom candles; somewhat early, Charles thought.

"My dear, do be reasonable!"

"How reasonable?"

"Why, only like this. You believe—don't say you don't—that the old boy was murdered and that his body is buried somewhere in the house. Or the garden. But where? And who do you suppose did it?"

"I don't suppose. I can't suppose." She was repeating his words of a moment since. He broke into a good-humoured laugh.

"Well done, Luce! Had me there! The engineer hoist with his own petard! I say—let's confess we are at our wits' end, and not argue."

"I am not at my wits' end."

"Well—what do you know that I don't?"

The eyes that rested on him might have been commiserating, though not without a certain recognition of his good-humour, as she said:—"It's no use my telling you. You'll only laugh."

"I won't. Do tell me." Her answer to this was a recapitulation of incidents known to the reader. His comment at the end was:—"Rum! But I don't believe in ghostesses, you see." He appeared, however, disposed towards an attitude of limited indulgence towards phenomena as long as they kept in their proper place. The power of suggestion, he said, was very strong. An impression of a spectral appearance, hallucination, or any game of that sort, once experienced by any member of a household, was sure to communicate itself to others; and however satisfactorily the first impression was accounted for by purely natural means, the faith of secondary percipients, or at least their affidavits of their experience, would remain unshaken for a very

simple reason; namely, that the foundation thereof, being precisely nothing at all, would retain its original value unchanged. He did not believe that the son of Tom the gardener had been asked by a venerable gentleman of masterful aspect, from the window of the long passage opening on the garden—which by now was known among the servants as “the haunted passage”—whether Mr. Carteret was coming, and when, whereupon he had undertaken to enquire of Miss Parker in the kitchen, and on returning could not find the venerable gentleman. Neither did Charles believe that a vendor of flower-pots, delivering a hundred thereof through the greenhouse, had been told, by anyone he could describe as her ladyship’s grandfather, to take back a broken one. Nor that the Wash’s little sister, wandering afar from the Wash, had returned to her, or it, in the kitchen to say that “the old gentleman” had sent her in to say he was waiting and somebody must come. There were other similar incidents in Lucy’s *résumé*, on which Charles threw doubt.

She did not seem to consider that she was bound to make any rejoinder to her husband’s exposition of the common sense of the case. But when she had achieved her bedroom candle, and was on the edge of departure, she said in a very casual way, as though it didn’t much matter:—“I wonder Tom’s son wasn’t afraid to take back a message to a ghost. I should have been, at his age.”

Her husband considered and then said, generously:—“I see. That walks into my suggestion theory. Yes—I suppose Tom’s son thought he was a real old gentleman. A suggestion of a ghost would have worked out as a ghost.” The supposition that Tom’s son saw a ghost to order, and then took him as embodied, would not wash, even when superstitions had to be dissipated. Charles climbed down from mere orthodox derision, and paid the subject the compliment of treating it seriously. “Look here, Luce!” said he. “You must have *some* theory about what was done with . . . with the remains. The body, I mean. Tell me, and I’ll have the place dug up to-morrow. Honour bright, I will!”

But she was not inclined to assist towards any definite action based on her convictions. “How *can* I have any theory, as you call it?” said she, impatiently. “All I know is, that Dr. Carteret was never seen to leave this house.” And so she left matters, going away, however, through the door which led to the lesser staircase, her usual practice certainly, but seeming

to lay stress on her distaste for the other route, which was very much nearer.

This mystery-mongering about Dr. Carteret—for that was how Charley described it to himself—was the only thing, in these days, that ever ruffled his equanimity. His wife's indifference to her baby was nothing; *that* would pass. She would become as devoted as he was at the shrine of Master Charles. But this idiotic fabrication of a ghost-story out of such very insufficient materials was really . . . ! Well—at least she was doing her sterling common sense a grievous injustice to lend herself to such rot. Why—no ghost worth the name, if any such existed, had ever haunted premises on such a shallow pretext. The whole thing was too ridiculous for words. Fancy his awe-inspiring old pedagogue deliberately haunting a house he had only set foot in for the inside of half an hour! The last man in the world to do anything so illogical!

Of course if Lucy's evident belief that the Doctor had been the victim of foul play in the house, and was actually buried there, was well grounded, then the ghost was a reasonable ghost. But how could such a thing be?

It is the only weakness a temperament incredulous about the supernatural is ever guilty of, that it lays down the law which real ghosts—if they existed, which they don't—would be amenable to. Charley felt sure that this was no *bona-fide* ghost, from his incorrect conduct.

Speculation about possible places of concealment, hitherto unsuspected, got on Charles's nerves, and made him restless about the corners of that passage just beyond the new door there. Look at the place again he *must*, just to make sure it was utterly impracticable as a cemetery! He lighted his candle and opened the door noiselessly, feeling all the while glad no one was there to see him behave so foolishly.

The emptiness and stillness of the place was unearthly. A sudden cat developed, and left by a window open at the top, treading several times on nothing to reach it, but not embarrassed by mechanical conditions. The little parakeets would have waked to a sudden debate at the sight of Charles's candle, had they been there as in the daytime. But they had been removed into an inner room. An irresolute moon, often outflanked by passing clouds, made the long passage visible to the end. But if ever a search had "Give me up!" written on the face of it, it was this one for a place where assassination might have

reasonably hoped to conceal its untidy consequences. The very floor-tiles, in which hexagonal fit the slightest wavering might have pointed to an interment—for this passage had nothing between it and *terra firma*—were closed edge to edge with a diabolical exactitude known to pressed-dust tiles alone. Which of us has been shown over a restored pariah church has not winced about its chancel? As for disturbing and replacing them, all the story can say is—try it.

No—if any evidence of the foul deed remained near at hand it was not in the house, but in the garden. And every square foot of its soil that was penetrable, without spoiling horticulture, had been turned over by spades that would have recoiled from the work of a predecessor.

Charles came back from his investigation more convinced than ever that the ghost story was simply a nervous delusion, originated by Mrs. Klem's report of her last sight of the Doctor, and cultivated by the strange epidemic faculty which such delusions are well known to have, until it had become a reality capable of affecting even the most sane and reasonable intelligences. Fancy his unlocking that door and going out in the passage to satisfy himself of the impossibility of a thing he already knew to be impossible!

He closed the door furtively, to minimise this lapse from masculine common sense, and then, not feeling disposed to go to bed yet awhile, resolved on half a pipe to assist cogitation, and retired to enjoy it into his smoking cabinet; to spare the atmosphere of the sitting-room, whereof the windows were closed and the curtains drawn, concealing bells that would have to be handled cautiously if he opened them.

He decided that he would banish the old Doctor's disappearance from his thoughts, with the usual result that he could think of nothing else. Look at that story of how the man that put that paragraph in the newspaper had got his particulars of the Doctor's disappearance from the family. Even an Irish journalist—Charles did not know why he should put it, mentally, this way; but he did—could not speak of the police as 'the family,' or even as intimate friends of the family. But he could only have got his facts from Scotland Yard. Who knew them at the time? Only one or two folks at the school, imperfectly; Fred and his mother, and himself. As for Elbows, query? Mrs. Carteret would never tell her, without a caution not to tell again, whether to an Irish journalist or anybody else. The Klems were negligible, as devotees of the bottle; and

uninformed at the time, anyhow. Not a soul else knew anything about it.

Except Lucy, of course! She didn't count.

The half-pipe was waning before Charles became aware that he had not banished the Doctor's disappearance from his thoughts. He gave up the attempt to regulate the subject-matter of his meditations, and accepted an effort to revive the name of Mr. Moring's informant. He did so because although he remembered throwing out O'Dowd and O'Flannigan as feelers for it—feelers for a reminder—he could not for the life of him recall the reminder, quite clearly spoken when it came, and repeated by him in acknowledgment.

McMurrough! Was it by any chance McMurrough? . . . Oh dear!—what a fool Charles was! Why—of course, McMurrough was the name of that man Lucy was speaking to at the play. *That* cock wouldn't fight.

His recollection was on its mettle to recover that name. He resumed in his mind the conversation that preceded Moring's second mention of it, made clearly in correction of his chance shots of O'Dowd and O'Flannigan, and was disconcerted with the plainness with which his memory of an elderly gentleman, probably well connected, replied:—"No—McMurrough." It was just before he made that remark about the Liberty of the Press, and departed.

Charles's equanimity was shaken by something in the persistency of his recollection, now aroused. "I *must* have heard the name wrong,"—said he to his memory, resentfully. But his memory respectfully but firmly insisted that it was right.

He might have treated the case as one of the same name—not a very uncommon one—borne by two different people. But two or three words of his wife had made this difficult, if not impossible. "He writes for the Press. Irishmen do." That came again to his mind, when it harked back on their entry to the theatre.

And yet—suppose this the same man! That is to say, the man at the theatre, a former acquaintance—indeed, a rejected suitor—of his wife's, the same as the man whom Mr. Moring reported to be the author of that paragraph, and to have had his information from an intimate friend of the family! And what was it he pledged himself to observe? What was he going to keep in mind?

Was it conceivable—was it possible?—that his wife was responsible for it? He tried to exclude the idea from his mind

—shut the door in its face, as it were; but it got in at the back window. Possible but inconceivable, was his answer to the question. Possible because anything is possible, everything is possible. Inconceivable because Lucy had given him an unconditional pledge of silence. He remembered how he had pressed Fred for leave to tell her, and how urgently he had represented to her Fred's desire that the subject should not be talked of.

The thought made him very uncomfortable as he walked slowly upstairs to his bedroom. Have not we all known the shock of the first discovery of duplicity or ill-faith on the part of some object of blind confidence, someone who has commanded the whole heart of our trustfulness? He was angry with himself for his disloyalty to his wife, as he accounted it, in admitting to his mind a doubt of the validity of her given word. The disillusionment which the cynic deems an invariable sequel of six months of married life was not yet complete enough in Charley for him to accept the possibility of such a thing unchallenged. The only cloud that had crossed the zenith of his idolatry so far had been the revelation that she had nervous fancies; fancies which, obsessing the faculties of a less clear-headed woman, might have made her superstitious.

CHAPTER XXVII

FRED woke late next morning at Maida Vale, and did his best to get into his clothes, to avoid anticipated cold eggs-and-bacon at breakfast. His exertions proved needless, for no one was visible when he went into the breakfast room, and no bell had rung. The testimony of Jane, the new servant, was to the effect that Miss Frasiour—whose name she elaborated to add to its effect—had gone out on her bicycle, but would return to breakfast. Jane was expecting her in any minute. Mrs. Carteret would take hers in her room. Would Mr. Carteret like his separate, or wait for Miss Frasiour? He would wait, certainly. In fact, he welcomed a *tête-à-tête* with the young lady whom he had once spoken of to Charley as his disintegrated sister-in-law; not on her merits, but because he wanted to feel his way to the delivery of that letter to Lucy.

Fred had had experience, in old times, of the deadly and incisive literal-mindedness of this young person. It had, in fact, been the basis of the half-confessed hostility between her and the two young men. But he had still to learn the full scope and intensity of her faculty of direct speech.

"You will be going over to The Cedars . . . soon?" said he, casually, to open the way to the request he had to make.

"Yes—next week."

This was much too far off. "I thought you would be going sooner," said Fred. "But I can manage."

"What's it for?" said Nancy. "I can go on purpose, you know."

"I want to get a letter to Mrs. Snaith."

"Why can't you send it by post?"

Why not indeed? Fred saw he had blundered at the very first outset. So much so that he was inclined to acknowledge defeat, and take to flight. "Of course I can send it by post. But I thought, if you were going . . . However, it doesn't really matter."

"That's absurd," said Nancy, after consideration. "It *must* matter. You wanted to get your letter to her for some reason. It wasn't soonness. The post would have been as soon as me. Unless I had been going this very minute. I can go—straight

away now, if the *madrina* is propitious. Where's the letter? Hand it over."

"It isn't written."

"Well then—write it! I can go to lunch at The Cedars just as easily to-day as to-morrow."

"Suppose Mrs. Snaith has gone out to lunch?"

"I can lunch with Master Charles. He'll have his bottle, and Gorhambury will feed me all right. Go and write it!"

Fred felt embarrassed. How could he word such a letter under pressure, with this obliging girl—he was bound to admit his obligation to her—waiting to carry it for him? The raw prosaic daylight alone threw him out of gear for the writing of such a letter. But it would never do to admit to Nancy that its contents were anything outside everyday life; the date of an appointment, for instance—that sort of thing. That she was so near the heart of his mystery as that interview overnight with his mother had left her, was a thing that never entered his imagination.

He had just begun to seek for a pretext that would lapse his application to Nancy, and cancel it, when he remembered that it was his only chance of getting a letter into Lucy's hands without risk of its being opened and read by her husband—or at least putting her in danger of being questioned about it—unless it were the one his whole soul recoiled from, of entrusting it to Charley himself, facing his unsuspecting honesty with the unflinching eyes of a liar. It would reach *her* unopened, but . . .

No—that was a thing he could *not* do! Anything but that. But then it seemed to him he could not write that difficult last letter of farewell offhand, so that Nancy could be the bearer of it here and now. Of course he could ask her to take it to-morrow instead. Only—how could he account for it? Except indeed by taking her into his confidence. That occurred to him. He was wondering what his mother would advise, when Nancy's own penetration, adroit for the moment among contingencies, seized upon a point that up till now had escaped its notice.

"What on earth," said she, "is to prevent you giving your letter to Mr. Snaith to take to her? You'll see him in town, won't you?"

He wavered and flinched off a straight answer, the true one being impossible. There were reasons, he said. They didn't seem comfortable ones, to judge by his voice.

"What are you going to say in it?" No arrow from Robin

Hood's bow ever struck venison or foeman straighter and swifter than this question of Nancy's struck into the heart of the matter.

It was evident to Fred that he must either make this girl his confidante, or give up the idea of entrusting his letter to her altogether. He chose the former course, influenced perhaps by the unblushing truthfulness—the only phrase that does it justice—of the frank gaze that met his as he looked up, surprised a little at her extraordinary directness. “Good-bye!” said he. Which was not an apostrophe to Nancy, but what he was going to say in his letter. To avoid the former interpretation, he added:—“I mean that that will really be the substance of the letter.”

“Look here! I know all about it. To say I didn't would be fibs. You are going away with your mother—somewhere.”

“Yes. We haven't settled where. We shall go almost immediately. But it is best that Lucy Snaith and I should not meet. You can see that?” He had thrown off all disguise of the tension he had to live under now, and was speaking with a strained earnestness. She merely nodded assent, and he continued:—“I could not go away without a word, and—what am I to do? Remember that, come what may, Charles Snaith has to be kept in ignorance of why I am going. The very worst thing that could happen would be that he should find out why.”

“I will take your letter, if you wish it; to-day or to-morrow, when you have written it. To-morrow would be best, because I can send a line to-day to say I am coming. You want me to give it to her herself, and see that she opens it? That's it, isn't it?”

“That's the sort of thing. I see you understand.”

“Very good, then! You write it and I'll take it.” But the proceeding was too surreptitious for Nancy to acquiesce in it without a protest. “It makes me feel like a thief in the night,” she said. “Like an area-sneak or a Venetian mystery. But I'll take it to her, because I see your fix.” Then reflection on the undertaking gave her misgivings; inclined her towards backing out of it. “I cannot for the life of me see why, if you can square it with Mr. Snaith when you see him to-day, you shouldn't give him her letter to take . . .” Fred shook his head as she hesitated, and was going to speak, when she interrupted him with:—“Oh yes, I do, though; I *do* see why. It would be too Venetian by half . . . But I'm not sure about the post. After all, why not the post?”

There was a ring of excruciating pain in Fred's voice as he answered:—"You *would* be sure—indeed you would!—if you knew how Charley and I have opened each other's letters for years past. If he came down first to breakfast to-morrow and found a letter from me in her lot, he would open it to a dead certainty. And suppose it was the letter I want to write to her—the letter I *must* write—how then?"

Nancy had an idea, but dismissed it as obvious nonsense, that the letter might be posted with superhuman discrimination, so as to reach Mrs. Snaith at a chosen moment. Anyone who has ever tried the experiment will know that her rejection of this idea was well grounded. "I don't half like the turn-out," said she. "But I can't see any other way out of it. You *must* write to her. I see that. You can't post it. I see *that*. And you can't give it to poor No— . . . Oh dear—I didn't mean . . . !!"

"Never mind. I knew you called him Nosey."

"To have in his pocket all the way down to Wimbledon. You must send it to her, and there's nobody but me to take it. So just you get it written and hand it over."

Said Nancy to Mrs. Carteret, later in the day, as a resumption of a former item of conversation earlier:—"I knew all about it of course, and he saw. Where was the use of humbugging? Besides, I do it so badly I shouldn't have kept it up. So I as good as told him I wouldn't take his letter unless I knew what was in it. He didn't tell what, except that it was to say good-bye. I wasn't asking for details, you know."

"No—I quite understood that. Then you'll take it to-morrow."

"That's the idea. If he's written it. Shan't if he hasn't."

"We shall find it at home when we get back. You'll see." For this was not at Maida Vale, but at a shop. It was one of those shops where they don't keep your size, and a young lady of perfect manners and an unparalleled sweetness of disposition had gone away from her side of the counter through a wilderness of avenues of counters, to seek in other climes for Mrs. Carteret's size in reindeer. So she and Nancy had picked up the thread of a previous chat.

"You think, then, you'll go to Paris for a week or so, and then on to Switzerland." Nancy had never been abroad, and spoke with a mysterious awe of foreign parts.

"That would suit Fred. He wants to prowling about the Exhibi-

tion, and particularly to see the flying machines. It will amuse him and make him forget . . . forget things."

"You think he will?"

Mrs. Carteret laughed. "My dear child!—of course he will. Men do. Do you suppose I mean to go abroad for ever, because my foolish son . . ."

"I know." Mrs. Carteret had stopped because she thought a stout lady was listening. "*She* won't hear. You needn't be afraid. She's too busy buying com . . ." Delicacy pulled the speaker up short.

"Well—I think Fred will have come to his senses within three months. . . . That young woman of ours is a very long time over these gloves."

"When do you expect to get away?"

"We *must* go at once, in order that he may not have to go to The Cedars. He says he can manage the excuse-making for a day or two, if I insist on going. So I shall insist. Only, it will never do to have a delay. Is that young woman *never* coming back? . . . Oh, here she is! Well, have you got my size?" Not in reindeer, said that young woman. Millions were ordered, and were certain to be in stock at dawn to-morrow. Many thousand gross of every other size were in stock now. Also, the almost incalculable accumulation of gloves other than reindeer consisted almost exclusively of Mrs. Carteret's size. Whether they were kid, Lisle thread, calf-skin, sackcloth or ashes, that young woman could supply any number of six-three-quarter at a fraction of a second's notice. But in reindeer, nothing before dawn to-morrow.

It really did not matter, as the time had been passed in chat that the story has thought worth recording, as having a direct bearing on its own tenor. Mrs. Carteret absolutely declined to compromise for gloves and silk stockings, however new the line of the latter; indeed, though the latest novelties, they looked to her almost painfully identical with the silk stockings of other days. So she and Nancy went their way, leaving the stout lady's young woman, who was of the bulldog type, all but trying on her by force a medium size of the garment she was seeking, in the teeth of her statement that she wanted the "out" size, and nothing a millimetre smaller would come on. The story avoids mentioning the garment by name, and it is not important that it should do so. Nancy said to Mrs. Carteret, as soon as they were outside the radius of this riot:—"I wonder which of those two will be top-dog." And Mrs. Carteret said:—"I wonder,

dear!" and explained, as soon as they had done losing their way in the shop, and got out at a new door into a street previously unknown to both, that she had only gone to this shop as an ascertained source of reindeer, and did not mean to buy anything in London; as she and Fred had decided to go to Paris, where shopping was a joy to the heart, even if the establishment spoke English, which took time. Nancy said:—"Can you buy things in French, then?" and felt how very much she herself couldn't.

For Mrs. Carteret had had a long interview with her son that morning, before he went away to a trial of his powers of dissimulation with Charley—how he shrank now from meeting his old friend, albeit the latter was as dear to him as ever!—and had had to wrestle with a disposition on his part to waver in his resolution to go abroad. She had met this with an emphatic:—"Nonsense, Fred! A promise is a promise, and I hold you to yours." She then went on to reason with him about the impossibility of his position if he remained at home. "Do you mean," said she, "to go on fudging up new excuses every week for not spending Saturday and Sunday at The Cedars, or do you mean to break your friend's heart and blacken his whole life? There is no half-way. It must be either the one or the other."

Fred was sorely put to it. "I know I made you a promise last night," said he. "But when I came to ask myself, what would *her* position be? . . ."

His mother at first said:—"Very well—go your own way, then!" and was half inclined to add—"And lose your mother as well as your friend." But she thought better of impatience. "Listen, Fred," said she, "you say you can manage with Charles Snaith if I make it a condition that we start on Saturday morning. I do make it a condition, for your sake. It's very inconvenient, but I will do it because the more I think it over, the plainer I see that if you stop here a tragedy will come of it. And the principal victim will be the one least to blame; I mean your poor dear friend Nosey, as Nancy calls him. What has he done, except put too much trust in his friend? . . . Oh yes—I know what people will say!" For Fred had been about to speak.

"They will say he should not have trusted you so much alone with his wife, and they said all along what would come of it. The idiots!—as if Eve . . ."

"Well—why did you stop?"

"Why!—it seemed like questioning the Higher Wisdom to say that if nothing had been said about the only tree in the garden Eve was not to eat, it was just a chance she would have kept her paws off that apple. Mr. Snaith would not have avoided this by chaperoning his wife. Rather the contrary."

"That's all true. But it does not make me feel any the comfortabler about my conduct towards her, if I simply run away for Charley's sake. Tell me, Mother mine, do you believe it to be really impossible for a man . . ."

"Go on, Fred. Speak out, to me."

"For a man to go on loving a woman and to hide his love—crush it out for her sake as well as his own—when surrender would only mean ruin for her and a life of self-reproach to him?"

Mrs. Carteret had been speaking earnestly, but her voice took a new sort of earnestness to say:—"I not only do not think it impossible. I know it to be possible. But not if the woman knows. So long as either believes the other in the dark, there is safety. But neither of you is in the dark, after Sunday evening. I am going by what you told me last night."

"All right. I told you exactly what happened. Yes. We have passed the Rubicon." Fred was too much absorbed in his own perplexities to wonder at his mother's slight change of manner.

They decided in the end, after much talk of this sort, that there was only one way out of the difficulty, and Fred went straight away to his chambers, to lock himself in and make the best he might of that letter to Lucy, which Nancy had promised to deliver to her the next day. He had not overmuch time to write it, for it had to be posted to Nancy in time for her to receive it next day before starting for The Cedars, which was a two hours' ride from Gipsy Hill, even for so expert a cyclist.

However, he managed to get it written somehow, face to face as he was with an insoluble problem—that of expressing undying love for a woman, leashed with unflagging friendship for her husband. In fact, he could not have written that letter at all, if he had not already spoken to her of his passion and its inexorable barrier, under the guise of a ridiculous hypothesis—an imaginary couple, dangerously like her husband and herself. That fiction in the past built a golden bridge to plain speech about the *status-quo* in the present.

The substance and effect of a letter almost too florid for an unconcerned bystander to follow with sympathy was that the

writer's position was unendurable—that begone he *must*, and that too without letting his eyes rest once more on the object of their adoration. He could not even bear, feeling towards her as he did, to touch her hand in token of farewell. He must go away, at whatever cost; where he knew not. He could, he knew, write to Charley—from whom, mark you, the understory of all this *must be* concealed—a plausible reason, first for the postponement of his return, then for his ultimate settlement in some remote locality which would lend itself to forgetfulness, although he could never hope to meet, there or elsewhere, perfections which etcetera.

There was a full measure of these *cetera*; and indeed the story is more than half inclined to forgive Fred that he did this once give the rein to his passion, in a way that was after all but a stinted indulgence of it. Remember that at the moment he was honest in his intention to wrench himself away from his temptation, and forget it.

His letter ended thus—too late for the evening post, but sure to be delivered before eleven o'clock next day; Nancy would not have started, no fear of that—"This letter will be handed to you by Miss Fraser, who has kindly arranged to visit you to-morrow that you may get it as soon as possible, and know my intention. I feel that I lost a good sister-in-law in 'Elbows.' How strange and long ago that time seems now! . . . What more have I to say? Only, forgive me! Forgive me that, having to choose between two courses, either of which means madness in the end, I choose the one that keeps my faith to my old schoolfellow intact. It is the one that stings the most, for my heart must remain yours. Farewell!"

Charles Snaith, who had left his home that morning feeling less comfortable than he had felt since he took possession of it, in spite of a particularly cheerful visit he had paid to his offspring, was not much surprised at Fred's non-appearance at the Holborn, although he was certainly looking forward to seeing him and hearing what he had settled about Norway. He decided that he had gone out to lunch somewhere. However, Charley was wrong there, for Fred had let his midday refection lapse altogether. He was too perturbed in his mind to be able to think of eating and drinking, and was living in an uncomfortable world of snacks.

Therefore it was that Charley, washing his hands of the Law earlier than usual, went three steps at a time up the prison-

stair that led to the diggings. It was not often that these friends were separated—or had been separated hitherto—for over forty-eight hours. Fred heard his name called from outside, and knew he had to be himself as of old, now or never. He answered the summons promptly, and greeted the visitor warmly.

"Come along in, old chap! I knew it was you. In fact, I've been taking you for granted, or I should have written."

Something in these words ran counter to the programme of the next twenty-four hours which Charley's mind had composed.

"But you're coming to The Cedars!" said he, blankly.

"Well—that's where the shoe pinches! No, I'm not. I can't."

"Rot!"

"Unfortunately it isn't rot, but sad reality. Come along in and I'll tell you." He knew he had a tussle before him to convince his friend he was in earnest. But it had to be gone through with. He proceeded with semi-fiction, for there was a measure of truth in it—that he and his conscience had agreed to resort to, to cover his defection. "You see," he said, "it's my mother. You know how much I have wanted her to go abroad with me, and how she has always refused." Charley nodded. "Well—when I told her I was going to take a holiday, she mentioned incidentally that an old friend of hers, who lives in Munich, had written to her to say she should be in Paris in a day or two, and had suggested that my mother should meet her there, as she hasn't seen her for fifteen years . . ."

"She be hanged! Why can't she come to London?"

"She's going with her husband to Marseilles, to meet a boat that's going a tour in the Greek Islands—her husband's a German antiquary—but they are spending two days in Paris on the way. Of course I offered to see the mother out, if she would go. I was rather surprised at her saying she would. But of course I jumped at it."

Charley showed impatience. He expressed a wish that the Devil might take all archaeologists, but especially German ones, who were all impostors, and knew of all things least about antiquity. "But how does that prevent your coming to The Cedars?" said he.

"Because it makes the time so short. These Ger-persons have only Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday in Paris. When my mother consented to go, she thought there was more time, but when we came to look at the letter, it turned out that she had confused

between this Sunday and the next. But she had promised, and I wasn't going to let her off."

Charley considered. "You're quite right," said he. "Do her all the good in the world! She hasn't been away since . . ."

"Since it. No—that's just it! She hasn't."

"But why should that prevent your coming with me now? Get your traps and come along, old man. You shall come back as early as you like to-morrow. Just think what the missus will say if I don't bring you back. She'll make a fine row."

"I was going to tell you why to-night's no go. You remember those Stockport people, Sampson and Strongitharm?"

"Yes—men who wanted to put money in the Anti-Vibration."

"Strongitharm did. Well—he's in town, and has written to say he'll be at the Grand Hotel at nine-thirty, if I can make it convenient to look in. I must. It's not a chance to lose."

"N-no! It's not a chance to lose. Lucy mustn't stand in your way there. But how about to-morrow? I know there are some beasts coming, but we can lump them. Anyhow, we must."

Then Fred promised, mendaciously, to come to-morrow if he could. There had been foundations of truth for every word he had said hitherto. The letter from Stockport was quite genuine; a piece of luck! "You see, Charley," said he, "it's a close squeak for time. I may manage to-morrow—will if I can." Then he indulged in the only honest untruth of which he was guilty. "You know, it isn't as if I wasn't coming back in a week or two at most."

If Charley's unsuspicion had not filmed his eyesight, he would have seen how haggard his friend's face was, how strained his manner. He saw enough to make him say to himself that a chap that looked like that would be all the better for a little sea-air, mountain-climbing, what not. . . . To Fred he said:—"Oh no—it's not a hanging matter; Luce will have to do without you for a bit. But I shall catch it hot, young feller—and so I tell you. However, come to-morrow if you can. If you can't—why, you can't! Now I must be off."

The thought crossed Fred's mind that he might never see Charley's face again. Yet he was glad he had gone—almost. He was sick to think how nearly.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THIS was the afternoon of the day on which Nancy, having duly received Fred's letter to Lucy, registered, had cycled over to deliver it to her at The Cedars. She had written to say she was coming, so she was expected.

"Sorry to inflict myself on you again so soon!" said she. "But I was asked to bring you a letter."

"You were asked to bring me a letter! Well now, what does that mean?"

"What it says. Here's the letter."

"Who's it from?"

"Look inside and you'll see." Nancy's style was epigrammatic. She had in fact made up her mind to answer no questions, and conveyed that resolve by a certain immobility of feature as she held Fred's letter out for her friend to take. "Now I've given it you, haven't I?" said she. "Fair and square as per undertaking."

"Yes; you've done your part." Mrs. Charles Snaith was pale—beautiful of course—as she looked for a moment at the letter, which she thrust hurriedly into her bosom; not what one generally does with a letter.

"Look here!" said Nancy, abruptly. "I shall go and pay Charles the Third a visit, while you read your letter."

"Oh—that baby? Very well. Go, dear!" She did not open the letter then and there, but fell back on a sofa, white with a bitten lip. She was asking herself, would Fred come back with Charles to-night? Unless the answer was negative, why this letter? Sounds of an appreciated baby—these sounds differ absolutely from everything else of which the human voice is capable—had been for some time audible from the nursery before she slipped her hand into her bosom in search of it. Even then she did not pull it out at once, seeming to flinch and vacillate.

But once fairly opened and the first words read, the text became the source of a greedy pleasure to her, visible on her lips without a smile, in her eyes without a gleam. . . . It was not a secret to show, even though not a soul was there to see. She read on and on, through the long letter to the end.

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Then the anger, that had begun to grow, half-way through, broke out in its fulness, and forced speech from her lips, though there was none but herself to hear the words. "Then let him go—let him go!" she cried out to the empty air. "What thought has he for me in this?" She went to the door after that, as though in doubt if she had been overheard, and looked up and down. But there was none to hear her. And nothing audible but the prolonged appreciation of Charles the Third—Nancy's name for him—in the distant nursery.

She threw herself again on the sofa, the letter half crumpled angrily in her hand. She was exasperated with herself, with Fred, with the World. And her inner consciousness was assigning a meaning to this last, beyond its usual interpretation. She called it the World, but she meant her mother. She had told that impressive lady, to her stony surprise, on the morning after the theatre, that it was perfectly ridiculous in her to try to throw the blame of something—something not very clearly defined—on that woman whom she had been quarrelling with, about the said something, on the previous evening. What had the woman done, when all was said, but mentioned some facts about Charles's family that were just as true now as they were then? She could not lay at her mother's door the sole blame for accepting them as guides, when she knew the extent to which she herself had been influenced by them. So she made an abstraction, the World, into a scapegoat, and denounced it mentally for her marriage with . . . a man she respected.

For she had no fault to find with Charley, except that he stood between her and her heart's desire. In fact, she had an almost cordial liking for her husband—was very sorry for him, anyhow. If she had not been amiably disposed towards him she would not have given herself away to him—that saw itself—however tempting might have been the prospect of a not too remote contingency; which she and her mother, by common consent, never referred to specifically now. Indeed, even in discussing last night's wrangle, no mention had been made of the noble Earl and his coronet, and the barren prospects of an heir direct. All details were ignored, held in abeyance. But there was no disputing that Charley, minus these contingent possibilities, was a very different prize from what he seemed when they were both contingent and possible.

Therefore her anchorage in her domestic haven, which she might have acquiesced in as long as she and Love remained strangers, as on the whole a very fair sample of a human lot,

in consideration of prosperities to come, had become an irksome bondage. It had been that, unconfessed, for some time past, when the sudden revelation had come of the state of mind of a man whose passion for herself had been as nearly anticipated by her own heart as might be, taking into account that she had half believed his own was given away elsewhere.

And now all the resolution of this discord that this man could see his way to was that he should take to flight, and run like a coward! Friendship was to take precedence of Love! We were to "master our passions, Love in chief, and be loyal to our friends." She recalled the words of Browning's poem, and they brought an almost ugly look to her beautiful face. "Where is his thought of me, in all this?"—said she again, as before.

One thing the letter made quite clear. He would not come to see her again, before he went away. He would not dare—not he!—to look her in the face and say:—"I must leave you for your husband's sake, for the sake of my old friend." He would run—would vanish—would become a thing of the past—would take to his heart the next woman he longed for.

Well—let him! She had her lesson, and understood. No need to caution her so strongly to let no clue to all this reach the knowledge of her husband! Was she a downright fool, to lose a useful mate whom she was pledged to love and honour, because forsooth a man whom she loved outright might have claimed her as his own; but would not, thereby to keep his conscience clear, and not betray his friend? No—if she must lose Fred, so be it! Why should she be less considerate of Charles than he? Keep the pretext in trim. Foster the decorum of the British household. Give gossip no plea for comment on the coolness between the married couple at The Cedars. Baffle Mrs. Candour!

That was Nancy, coming from the nursery. Was she to know anything of this? *Did* she know anything of this?

"Dear!—how white you look!" This cut across a languid enquiry from Lucy:—"Well—how's the blessed baby? I ought to go up and see him, I suppose. I'm supposed to be his mother, I believe." Nancy responded:—"I should rather think you are. Wish I was!"

"You may have him, dear, as far as I'm concerned. But I'm afraid his father won't give him up. He's infatuated about him."

"He's not an unnatural beast," said Nancy, imperturbably.

Neither of these ladies seemed to wish the other to think her in earnest.

The conversation did nothing towards answering the question Lucy had asked herself. Did Nancy know, or not? The safest thing would be to skirt round the topic, with an eye to crossing the fence if a chance came. "Mrs. Carteret is going to take her son away from us, I understand," said Lucy, tentatively.

"That's the way he puts it in the letter, is it?"

"I gathered as much from something he said in his letter," said Lucy, reservedly.

"Very well. If you want me not to talk about it, I won't." This was in response to the barest hint that the letter was to her, not to the general public.

Lucy hesitated. "I should so much like to know, dear," said she, "how much . . . I mean whether Fred Carteret said anything at all to you of the contents of the letter." She made the alteration in her speech to soften down the meaning—to keep it a little off the point.

"Precious little to me," said Nancy. "What he said, he said to his mother. She told me things. I waited up on purpose to hear."

"And does he know how much you know about it?"

"Rather. I told him flatly. That's why he gave me the letter to bring. He couldn't have made a reason for my bringing it unless he knew I knew."

"What reason did he make? I don't know if I quite see."

"You'll see if I tell it all through. He wanted me to bring you this letter, and I said why on earth not send it by Mr. Snaith. He could only hum and haw, and say there were reasons. So I just asked him what he was going to say in it. That was the most natural thing—wasn't it?"

Lucy did not keep back a smile. "You are the funniest girl," said she. "What had he to say to that? What was his most natural answer?"

Nancy did not look exactly resentful. Dignified, perhaps. "He did not seem to see anything peculiar in the question," she said. "He said the letter would merely be to say good-bye to you. So to make his mind easy, I just told him I knew all about it. I think he felt that was all right." She thought a minute before adding:—"Of course having had a narrow squeak of being a party's sister-in-law doesn't make one exactly a party's father-confessor, but . . . Well!—it intimatises things, don't

you see? Things which would, otherwise, be extimate. Like internal and external, don't you know?"

"Oh dear yes!—I quite understand. A man would never be quite the same who . . . even as a duty . . ."

"Precisely!" Nancy produced a clean pocket-handkerchief—not the bicycle one; that was in abeyance—and wiped a memory of Fred off her face. "However, we didn't rake up details. He pitched it very strong that, come what might, Mr. Snaith must be kept out of it."

"Listen, you mad child, and tell me one thing seriously. Did he make any allusion to me?"

Nancy saw the pallor of the speaker's face, and felt glad that she herself was "out of it," the "it" she was out of being explained—by herself to herself—as "Love and all that sort of thing"; a sort of thing to which female beauty, preferably accompanied by a certain succulence or tenderness, was an essential she did not possess, so she was safe out of it. Nothing to tempt a cannibal in *her*!—that was how she worded explanation, possibly needed. But she could sympathise with friends whose outline and texture had entangled them in that sort of thing. In answer to Lucy's question she thought long enough over the answer to make it exactly true, and replied:—"I can't say exactly he didn't make any allusion to you, because we both did, and called you *her*. But what you mean is—did he talk about you? Isn't it?"

"Yes—about me. What did he say about me?"

"Nothing. And I wasn't going to ask him." Lucy crossed to the window, and stood looking out. Nancy added:—"It isn't any of it *my* fault, you know."

But the flash of resentment Lucy had hidden—the bitten lip that spoke of a swelling heart; the passionate tears so hard to keep back—was not against her friend. She quenched it, and returned whiter than ever, otherwise in possession of herself. "No—dearest child!" said she. "I know it isn't your fault." For she always spoke to Nancy as though to a junior, although she was really two or three years the younger of the two.

"I wish he hadn't bottled up so, but said more. Then I could have told you." Thus Nancy, with the afterthought:—"But I thought it would all be in the letter. Isn't it?" Then a revision of it:—"No—what a fool I am! Of course, the letter wasn't written then. If he had said anything to me about you he would have told you."

"Well—he doesn't refer to you in the letter, except to say that you will bring it." As if infected with Nancy's accuracy she reopened the letter, glanced at it, and said:—"Oh yes—he says he lost a good sister-in-law, when . . ."

"When he didn't marry Cit." Then Nancy used the very expression Fred had used. "Oh dear—what a long time ago that all seems!"

"Exactly what he says himself," said Lucy.

"I always think now," said Nancy, "that I knew what was coming then. But perhaps I'm only I-told-you-soing."

Lucy followed the new verb, and understood it. "Oh, Nancy," said she, "I hope you don't mean that I . . ."

"That you whatted?"

"That I did anything that day when . . ."

"I know when. No—you were quite maidenly and all that sort of game, that time. I don't go by you. I go by Cit."

"What did Cit do?"

"She flew out. Like a Turk. But it wasn't your fault. It was all Fred. Not but what, in his place . . ."

"In his place!" What were you going to say?"

"In his place, I might have been just as bad. If I had been a *him*, you know!"

"You are a queer girl! You look so innocent, and then you seem to know *such* a lot, about it."

Nancy shot back into her shell like a hermit-crab detected out of doors. "I don't see that there's anything to know about," said she, stiffly. Then, perhaps to change the subject, she went off at a tangent. "I tell you one thing though. I never said what I ought to have seen—that Fred wasn't really in love with Cit, all along. . . ."

"Not in love?" asked Lucy, in an odd, inquiring way.

"Not as he *ought* to have been."

"Ought people?" Lucy did not ask this question as one who expects an answer, but as one who casts doubt. Then she fairly took her hearer's breath away by saying, without emotion:—"I was never in love with my husband."

"I don't believe you!" said Nancy, flatly.

"Don't if you like. But it's true. Of course I don't mean that I dislike him, don't you know? I respect him and all that. He's the sort of man it would be very creditable to any woman to be in love with. I quite see that. But . . ."

"I wish you wouldn't talk so horribly. But what?"

"But there *are* limits."

"You should have thought of that before you married him." Nancy was very much excited; flushed and almost angry.

"That sounds very correct," said Lucy, more as though it really did than as a sneer. She spoiled it though, by saying:—"How I hate heroics! I wish, dear, you wouldn't mind coming down off the high horse, and talking reasonably."

"I hate reason. Reasonableness is out of it, when it's about—this sort of thing."

"So it seems!" said Lucy, coldly. But when she next spoke, she got no answer, and turning round to look for one, found she was alone. For her friend had vanished, and the reason thereof was clear a moment later, when a bicycle bell's sub-tinkle was audible outside. She went out of the room, and into the front garden, just as the rider was mounting. "I'm so sorry," she said. "Do please forgive me! Only this once. I'll be as sentimental as you like." But her tone was ill-chosen.

"Now you're making matters worse," said Nancy, grimly. Lucy changed her note. "Nancy darling!" said she appealingly. "Don't be angry with me. If you knew what it was to . . . to be like me . . ."

"I see that you're in a fix," Nancy interrupted. "But you got yourself into it."

"Does that make it any easier to bear? Oh—don't be so hard with me! At any rate, don't go!"

"I don't see why I shouldn't. I've given you the letter, and that's what I came for. . . . No—I do *not* see why one should stay to have a dose of common sense emptied into one's very vitals. Not but what"—relenting a little—"I like common sense in its proper place, only not in this connection." But she was giving in to the pathos of the large dark eyes.

So, as was to be expected, when Lucy spoke to her, or seemed to speak, from her heart, she gave up the point, and went back into the house to their former anchorage; but this time with a carefully closed door, to shut in a real confidence.

"I'm sorry I was so miffy," said Nancy, apologetically. "But you did seem to me so *very* unfair to Mr. Snaith."

"Nancy dearest," said Lucy, "suppose I tell you everything! If you would let me, I think I would rather."

Nancy said afterwards to Mrs. Carteret:—"I didn't *above* half like being told, but what was I to do?" She then repeated what she *had* done, which was to say:—"All right—fire away!"

Lucy produced Fred's letter. It seemed to concentrate and

define the topic. "I suppose you know, or half know, what he has written to me," she said.

"I'm not sure that I did, till you asked. But I do now, from your way of putting it."

"However, you knew generally?" Nancy nodded. "Dear, I can't tell you what a relief it would be to me, if you would only say you are sorry for me."

Nancy considered. "I'm not given to being sorry for people who get themselves into fixes over this sort of thing," she said. "The T.P. isn't exactly my line. But I'm sorry for Mr. Carteret. Because I see he couldn't help himself."

"Oh dear—then you are *not* sorry for me? I suppose I deserve it."

The conversation had wavered on the edge of seriousness, but had never crossed over the boundary. Nancy suddenly flung reserve aside, *more suo*. She turned on her friend, face flushed and eyes flashing, with:—"Lucy Snaith!—how *dared* you marry your husband?"

The beautiful woman flinched before the plain one—she was plain by comparison—and threw up her hands, almost as though to ward off a blow. "Oh, what could I do—what *could* I do?" she cried out, despairingly. "Indeed—indeed I liked him as well as any man I knew at the time. And think what it was, when he was so urgent and my mother backed him up so . . ."

"What made your mother back him up?" Nancy was not going to think this question and not ask it.

Now, though Lucy and her mother rarely agreed, they were mother and daughter. And a daughter may slate her mother *en famille*, but not in the market-place. So she palliates her always; before enemies, usually before friends. She introduced a scapegoat. "I don't think you know the woman," said she. "Mrs. Bannister Stair—do you?"

"Not in the least. What about her?"

"Well—she quite poisoned mamma's susceptible mind with stories about Charles's connections, and his great expectations. And poor dear mamma, who is simplicity itself about this sort of thing, swallowed it all down for Gospel."

Nancy felt incredulous about the simplicity, but she kept her scepticism in the background, saying merely:—"And I suppose there wasn't a word of truth in it?"

"Not a word! At least, I should say, it was all right enough about the connections, but it was all wrong about the expectations. Charles's father was a younger son who had quarrelled

with his family. And if he hadn't, he couldn't possibly have come into the title."

"The title! Were they dukes, then?"

"Something of that sort. Earls or marquises, I believe. I knew nothing about it, and am not supposed to know."

"Your mother knew, and you didn't. You mean that?"

"Yes—of course!" Lucy felt as if she was telling truth all through, because she was only saying yes and no. If she had been called on to say unblushingly:—"I was told nothing about my husband's prospects, and I never asked," she would have spoken the lie boldly for what Prussia calls military reasons—her own exoneration at any cost being the chief one. As it was, she paid Truth the compliment of feeling happy she could manage the job with monosyllables. Having used them, she got away as quick as possible to her mother and Mrs. Stair, chiefly the latter. "You'll understand now, dear, why I hate the woman as I do. It was her ridiculous officious nonsense that set my mother off about Charles; and after all she was only acting in her daughter's interest, as she thought. Parents do that kind of thing, I am told. I wish they wouldn't. Because they make mistakes. She certainly did."

"Do you mean to say," said Nancy, drastically, "that if it had not been for your mother you would have refused Mr. Snaith?"

"My dear, how *can* I tell? All I can say is, that my mother was very urgent. And at the time . . ."

"Which time?"

"When the arrangement was made."

"I see. When he was spooneying up to you. Go on. At that time . . ."

"At that time I certainly knew no one I liked better than Mr. Snaith. I am sure of it. I am not quite prepared to say I accepted him to oblige mamma."

"But it's on those lines?"

"You may put it that way. I really had no strong motive."

"So you added a lot of weak ones together. Wasn't that it?"

The beautiful eyes looked aimlessly at space under half-closed lids, and their owner replied:—"It may have been. I daresay it was." But she appeared dissatisfied with her own answer, for a moment later she added:—"Perhaps. Perhaps not."

Nancy's face remained fixed, as of set purpose. She waited for clear evidence that her friend had done speaking and then said abruptly:—"Well—which *was* it?"

Lucy may have thought—as Fred had done before her—that perhaps, after all, outspeech would be the safest course as well as the easiest, with this girl. “There!” she said suddenly, “I won’t make any more pretences. You are so dreadfully truthful, Nancy dear, that it quite gets on one’s nerves. . . . Look the other way and I’ll tell you!”

“Stuff! Tell me without.”

“Well—it isn’t fair of me to put it all on my mother. It’s no use pretending I didn’t know the whole story. Or that I wasn’t influenced by it, for that matter! I was.”

“It was a good big story to be influenced by, after all.” This meant that Nancy’s mind was seeking to palliate her friend, purely for friendship’s sake. For she found the materials bad to handle.

“You wouldn’t have been influenced by it, you know you wouldn’t. Come now!”

“Couldn’t say what would happen if some Dukes and Earls turned up among my admirers. None have, so far. But then nobody else has, for that matter! However, I am very sensitive to large landed estates, with villagers.” Nancy knew she was talking nonsense.

Lucy passed by the points raised. “I admit this to *you*, dear, because I know you won’t be hard upon me. But of course my husband is in blessed ignorance, and I hope will remain so. Because I value his esteem—and all that sort of thing. You understand?”

“I understand that when you talk in that way you make my flesh creep.”

“Nancy dear! Why should we be so artificial? Remember that I have to live with the knowledge that I do not love my husband. I certainly respect him. Oh yes—I respect him. But as for *love* . . .”

Nancy rose in her wrath. “Lucy, I tell you I—*will*—*not* talk to you, if you talk in that horrible way. Do you mean to say you married Mr. Snaith without feeling the smallest . . .?”

The beautiful woman thought over it, quite deliberately. “I don’t think I do,” she said at last. “Because I remember feeling quite an affection for him once. It was his enthusiasm about Mr. Carteret that made me like him, after he first brought him to Devonshire Place. I told him it was delightful to hear a man sing the praises of his friend. So he went on singing them, and I listened. Yes—I really liked him for that.”

"That wasn't being in love!" Nancy spoke scornfully, and as if she were an authority, of wide experience.

"Well, Nancy dear, I can't unmake the facts, to oblige anybody. It was enough to make any woman like him, to hear him talk about Fred Carteret."

"I don't see anything to apologise for. I think it perfectly contemptible to be unable to like a man because . . . of . . ."

"Because of what?"

"Because he isn't up to one's ideas of personal beauty."

"You weren't going to say that. You were going to say because of something."

"Well—if you insist upon it, because of his nose."

"I do insist upon it. But I must confess that for a long while Charles's nose did stand between us. In fact, I don't think I should ever have got over it—the nose—if my mother had not trotted out the earldom. It was all that odious woman's doing."

"But she told you nothing but what was true—at the time. You know it was."

"I know nothing of the sort. She knew perfectly well what the position was. She admitted as much to my mother only two nights ago, when we were at the play, and my mother told me yesterday. If she had known at the time, it would have made all the difference. Oh dear—it's past praying for now!" She sighed wearily, and sat listlessly fanning herself. For the summer day had grown very hot, and thunder was muttering all round, perhaps about how chilly the air was going to be after its innings were over.

There was one point which even Nancy's directness scrupled to make the subject of undisguised catechism. She could not say to her friend:—"Your affection for your husband is very slipshod, but does that mean that you love Fred Carteret?" She wanted an answer to this question, for all that! Fred's mother had told her nearly all the version of the garden interview she had had from her son, but had rather made light of it, saying—as she had done to him—that a kiss was not conclusive and that its passive reception did not necessarily imply a readiness on the lady's part to throw up the advantages of an established social position for the sake of its giver. Nancy was as nearly within reach of an answer to this question as she was ever likely to be. Was the opportunity to be let slip?

She owed it to Mrs. Carteret to get what light she could thrown on this question. "Do you mean to write to him, or do

you not?" seemed to her a concession to a polite delicacy of speech, a departure towards tact somewhat outside her usual outrightness; and at the same time likely to lead to useful information.

"Do I, or do I not? How can I tell? What should you do in my position?"

"I should never be in your position. So where's the use of talking about it?"

"The use is that I want to know. What should you . . . ?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"Look at this, Nancy! I'll tell you honest truth. I despise Fred Carteret. Yes—I despise him for running away."

"Then you don't *love* him, according to my ideas."

"Perhaps not. But I *want* him. I want him back. What right has he to place his love for his friend above . . .

above *you*? Is that it?"

"Yes—that's what I mean. What right?"

"Can't say! But I should run away, if I were in his place."

"Why?" Nancy found this too difficult to answer offhand. Yet she was probably as well able to sympathise with a young man in Fred's position as any young woman of her class and upbringing. So her answer hung fire, and Lucy repeated:—

"Why should you run away?"

Nancy saw safety in metaphor. "When I was a small," said she, "and was told I wasn't to steal sugar, I ran away from the basin."

Lucy caught her up resentfully. "That's the sort of thing people say," she said, "and it maddens me. Are women always to be a sort of lollipops, to be taken or left?"

"It's their own doing. What do they fig up for, except to be titbits?" The story's belief is that though Nancy worded this question on the surface of the subject—indeed how could she do otherwise?—yet it went to the very root or source of it.

"Lucy's reply showed a wider experience, probably. She accepted the sugar metaphor. "Do you mean to say, Nancy," she asked, "that you couldn't leave the sugar alone, after you had been told not to touch it?"

"No, I couldn't," said Nancy, with decision. "I ran away from the basin. . . . You won't get round that way." These last words betrayed a sense of the unsoundness of the metaphor, and a suspicion of the danger of relying on it.

"You must have been a very naughty child."

"No, I wasn't. I was human."

"You mean, then, that Fred Carteret is running away because he's human?"

"Just exactly that. He can't help himself. He has absolutely no course open to him except to run away—from the basin."

"You've got back to the sugar again. I don't think it a fair comparison."

No more did Nancy. But everyone feels bound to stand by his analogy. "I think it very fair—for a comparison—" said she. She added with immovable gravity:—"Comparisons won't always wash. But they do to talk with."

A face less bent on its thought than Lucy's might have relaxed into a smile at Nancy's comment, or at least heeded it. Lucy passed it by! "It is *not* a fair comparison," said she, "because the sugar has no choice. Is a woman not to have any voice in the matter?"

Nancy then made an observation which some may think went to the root of the subject. You can't expect," said she, inexorably, "to eat your cake and have it too." It certainly showed that thought had passed through her mind which had not found its way to words.

That might easily have been her friend's case too, to judge by her heightened colour and the way her articulation caught her breath. "I suppose he must go—he must go—he must go!" said she, in hurried scraps of speech. "But I wish he could have thought of *me*. If he had known what he was to my life!"

Nancy looked hard at her, as if she would have seen through her, literally. "I wonder if you know what you seem to mean," said she.

"What do I seem to mean?" She asked anxiously, as though her friend's answer might reveal her to herself—help her to know her own mind.

"Perhaps you don't."

"But what was it you thought?"

"That you fancied you could keep up to the scratch, and yet have as much as you wanted of . . ." This was sailing too near the wind, and Nancy shied off, to avail herself of metaphor. "It was nonsense!" said she. "You *can't* have another little boy to play with." She added a postscript, after reflection:—"Unless you want to drive him raving mad!" She got suddenly back from the land of metaphor. "And your husband too, for that matter! And yourself—in the end."

No, so very unlikely, if words are guides to feeling—words cut short by a shortened breath! Lucy's, so spoken, were:—"Is it my fault—my fault—that men are like that?"

"Shall I tell you what you are?"

"You think I am a fool?"

"Well—I do. And I think Fred Carteret's got a fit of not being a fool, for once. He's quite right to run away. I should if I were in his shoes."

Lucy flashed back:—"Then what right has he to write me a letter like this, to say why he's going? Does he want to drive me mad?" And so they talked on, Nancy always feeling very much out of her depth, and a trespasser in strange waters, even though she went no more than ankle-deep. She was conscious of an intention not to tell her sister a word of this conversation. The story wonders, apropos of Lucy Snaith's vague state of mind about Fred Carteret, what was the sequel of that curious interview already referred to for which the reader of poetry is indebted to Mr. Browning. The lady ends, you will remember, by inviting the gentleman to dinner with herself and a presumably very young daughter, the only chaperone indicated, who must have been still liable to be sent to bed early. Perhaps, however, the gentleman went home to roost betimes; or, for that matter, the lady was expecting a maiden aunt. All the story knows is, that it does not envy the gentleman, and considers that the lady, though she was able to strangle his soul with a lock of her yellow hair, was not at all fair to him, but the reverse. Anyhow, it is very sorry for him, as it is for Fred Carteret.

CHAPTER XXIX

THAT evening at The Cedars had a penitential cast, having been kept open for Fred, who never appeared. Lucy naturally did not say a word of the letter she had received from him, though she might easily have reduced it, for working purposes, to a mere line on a card to say don't expect him, reported and perhaps looked for in an insincere pocket. She was wisest on the whole to make no such excursion into fiction, merely saying to her husband, when he reappeared somewhat late in the evening:—"I see he hasn't come," without appearance of concern. Charley felt relieved, for he had anticipated a much more inconsolable attitude.

"He'll come to-morrow, darling," said he. "If only those beastly nice persons were not coming, we could have had a jolly evening for a send-off. What is their respectable name?"

"The Akermes. Porley Akers. We must be civil to them, because they've taken The Refuge—that big house at Esher—and besides, she was a Miss Payne, whose mother knew us at home, I believe. We shall have to endure them."

"All right!" said Charley, cheerfully. "I'll deflect them off you, and you shall have him all to yourself, all the evening. You see, he got a letter from a machinery bloke, fixing this evening to talk to him about the great invention—the Anti-Vibration Engine. He couldn't put him off. It was impossible."

"Oh—that was it, was it? I thought it was his mother, somehow."

"So it is. Mrs. Carteret has consented to go to Paris, to meet an old friend, and she and her husband have to catch a boat, and . . ." And a good many other particulars.

"I see," said his wife when they began to flag. "They have to catch a boat. That's very pressing. Nancy Fraser told me some of this. . . . Yes—Elbows, if you choose. She came to lunch."

"Oh—then I expect you know as much as I do." He went away to get ready for dinner without having received from her manner any impression of anything unusual or sinister afoot.

Is it usual for young husbands to impute two distinct personalities to their wives after a couple of years' experience? If so, Charles Snaith's estimate of his was only developing on the

line of least resistance, when he recognised, as he had done for some months, a distinct duplex identity in Lucy, a sort of feminine version of *Mr. Hyde* and *Dr. Jekyll*. For the former he had, so far, only admitted to himself a disposition in her which she had in common with that Mary whose garden was known to a contemporary poet, as containing silver bells and cockleshells and cowslips all in a row. He would say to himself that Luce had a fit of contrariness on her to-day, but it would soon pass off—a thing which the poet seems to imply will never be done with Mary. Her other identity was revealed to him as her true and better self, which always underlay a contrariness which, though ingrained in her prototype—was fortitious in her and even in a sense assumed as a sort of discipline. He told himself that Mr. Hyde that *Dr. Jekyll* should not make himself too cheap. He considered that this individuality was best described by the word propitious.

Never had the young lady been more propitious to him than on this particular evening, and it was to Charley another evidence—though none was wanted—of the singular beauty and purity of her character that this propitiousness should manifest itself abnormally under the disappointment of which the whole evening was conscious, due to the absence of Fred, and the certainty of its continuance. However, even if he didn't come to-morrow, two or three weeks was not eternity. Never were the soles of feet more unconscious of the fires below than Charley's, as he trod this furlong of his path in life.

"Be a propitious and benevolent angel," said he, as she took the chair in the smoking-room Fred usually occupied, "and pass your deserving husband the matches." She not only complied, but went so far as to light one and consign it to him. There was a great contentment on his face as he lit his cigar, and subsided to an enjoyment of it which the proximity of her fingers had enhanced.

"I did tell you, didn't I, that I had a visit from that dear mad bull?" Lucy added, in case this should be unintelligible,—"That mad bull of a girl—Nancy Fraser. She came on her bicycle."

"Oh ah—Elbows! What has Elbows got to say for herself?"

Lucy smiled down from a pinnacle on a memory of Nancy. "Such a funny girl!" she said. "I can't help laughing at her." But her husband couldn't give proper attention to a chance incident of the conversation like Nancy, as his Havana was not drawing to the full of his expectations. Would his

wife be more propitious still, and lend him a hairpin? She would, although its withdrawal involved the fall of a released black splendour on a white shoulder. Charley kissed that hairpin in acknowledgment, with the comment:—"Very thin kissing!" as a hint that lips would be not unwelcome. He did not get them, and had to be content with the shoulder, *en passant*.

But he perforated the Havana, without piercing its side, which we all know ends any cigar's life. Then he had time to hark back to his forsaken question. "Let's see—what were we talking about? Oh yes, Elbows! What did Elbows say?" But he didn't really want to know, as his eyes were at rest on the beautiful image before him. All his, it was! Why think of anything else?

"She had been at Mrs. Carteret's, yesterday. So I heard the whole story at first-hand. Mrs. Carteret wants to see this Elise Höfer, whom she hasn't seen since she married her German. No doubt Fred is very glad to get her away on any terms. He always is saying how bad it is for her to go on peaking and pining about that old Doctor . . . Really the disappearance incident is getting so long ago that it will soon become a bore. These things have got to be forgotten, sometime or other."

Charley welcomed this as a sign that his wife was getting the better of her leanings towards superstition, and applauded what he might otherwise have protested against as unfeeling. "Quite right you are about that!" said he. "Don't see the fun of crying over spilled milk! Besides, old Stultifex—that's what we used to call him; Stultifex Maximus, after the place—old Stultifex had had a pretty long whack, and he might have died lots of ways. It wasn't like a young man, mind you! . . ." Then he repented of his pessimistic tone, and reinstated optimism:—"Only don't you run away with the idea that I believe he won't turn up again, yet."

"If he does it will be very . . . interesting." The young lady hid the beginning of a yawn behind her fingers.

"It's all very fine to be incredulous," said Charley, interpreting her manner in that sense. "But don't you see, sweetheart, you're not a fair judge. *You* stand committed to believing the old boy dead."

"Do I?"

"To be sure you do. You've seen his ghost, you know. A party who sees a party's ghost stands committed to believing him dead."

"I wish you wouldn't . . ."

"Wouldn't what?"

"Talk in that way."

"Very well then, I won't. . . . What's the matter, dearest?"

"Nothing. . . . No—really nothing! Only you talk so uncomfortably. Suppose we talk of something else!" She was really looking quite upset.

He seized on another topic obediently, the first that came to hand. "Suppose we do!" he said. "Let's talk about Hilda and her Perplexities. We haven't done Hilda justice." This of course was the play they had seen two nights ago. It was not a fortunate subject, the young person's chief perplexity being how to combine a rigid morality with a disposition towards several male characters in the same piece after interviews short enough to allow of its performance between half-past eight and eleven. This disposition had features in common with greed.

"Hateful girl!" said Lucy. "But she was too improbable and . . . and altogether too inartistic to talk about."

"Very well then, we won't," said her husband. Exit Hilda, to Lucy's satisfaction, because although she thought of her own case—as one does—as of one entirely exceptional and not the least like those of the people on the stage and in the newspapers, she perceived the fatal liability of the latter to points in common with it, due to the habit of authors of drawing on Nature when their own invention is exhausted.

Therefore, according to Lucy, Hilda was too inartistic to talk about; but the evolution of another topic lay with her husband, and this justified silence on her part, relieved by the use of a fan. For the thunder-clouds of the morning had put off active operations, and given the sultry heat an extension of a short lease, such as caloric has to be content with in a normal English summer. So she fanned half-closed eyelids, dropped lazily over eyes that took no interest in anything in sight, and wondered what pleasure men could find in horrible cigars, in weather like this.

The immediate man puffed at his, pondering with animation over the problem of what he should say next. He had been headed off two topics, but he knew of a third, one that he had set aside in his mind as a mystery that called aloud to be cleared up at the next opportunity. Was this it?

"I say, Luce!" This followed a silence, quite half an inch long, measured on the cigar.

"Yes. You must make haste, because I want to get to bed. It's late. . . . What is it?" She yawned illustratively.

"Mustn't keep you out of bed. . . ."

"Nonsense! Go on."

"It's only to satisfy my curiosity."

"Well—what is it?"

"What was that Irishman talking about—at the theatre?"

She was not prepared to be asked this question, and her want of preparation was just visible in her manner as she asked in return:—"What Irishman? When?"

It was an injudicious pretext. Charles recited full and substantial particulars, ending with a repetition of the words the gentleman had used, in an enriched brogue.

Now, if Lucy had only been fully alive to the advantages of speaking the truth, and nothing but the truth, she would have represented to Charles, as she and he were returning from the play, how that her anxiety that he should go away to smoke had been occasioned by her desire, in the interests of veracity, to reproach Mr. McMurrough for a gross and unpardonable breach of faith two years since, when he utilised for his newspaper particulars of a private domestic tragedy communicated to him in the most solemn confidence. She might have done any amount of penitence for her own indiscretion, ascribing it to a misunderstanding on her part of the solemnity of the pledge of secrecy she had given to her lover. That would have assoiled her—after two years; quite a little eternity!—of more than a few words of easily borne blame. But she stood committed to duplicity by the attitude she had taken up since. In this way the most harmless little fib will grow and grow, and become an infliction to its papa or mamma, who will have to nourish and protect it as though it were truly the apple of their eye. However, this is common experience, and does not need telling.

The opportunity was gone by for confession and what would have been a very easy penitence. Lucy's only safety lay in an enforced effrontery, every moment of which intensified its necessity. It would be better to throw herself into the part in full—to be hanged for a sheep rather than a lamb. "How very odd!" said she, taking care to feel genuinely puzzled. "What can he have meant?" She had better have let it go at that—left Truth to shift for herself, relying on the shyness of that goddess to keep her at the bottom of her well; and her husband's unconcern to keep him from the well-head, and his paws off the handle. But she must needs reinforce her position. "What I can't make out," said she, "is your hearing it and me not. Are you quite

sure you heard right?—quite sure it wasn't something somebody else said to somebody else?"

"Quite absolutely certain. Because it was answering you. I know your voice by now, ma'am!" There was a lovingness in his look and manner as he spoke to her of herself that was unwelcome to her. She did not wish to have her duplicity rubbed in.

"Indeed! I suppose you heard what I said, then." How devoutly she hoped he hadn't!

But his ears had been offensively sharp. "Well—I did. At least, I heard the two last words."

"Can you recollect them? They might remind me."

"Yes. 'Not forget.' It might have been 'Mind and not forget.' Or anything of that sort. And then he said he would pledge himself, and would bear it in mind. What was it he was going to bear in mind?"

She thought it better to do a good deal of recollecting before she said another word. It looked well to have the solution of this mystery at heart—showed that she had nothing to fear from its publication. After prolonged research in the caverns of memory, she was in a position to turn round, look her husband full in the face, and say:—"No. It's very funny!—but I can't remember anything at all about it."

It is a perplexing and embarrassing thing to be told a downright lie by a perfect stranger. How much worse when it comes from lips we have revered as the very source of truth itself! Of course Charles's decision was unhesitating. He had made a mistake. Otherwise, Lucy would have been speaking untruly. Which was impossible, Q.E.D.

"Good-night!" This only waited long enough for the full stop after her disclaimer of memory of anything at all about it. "I shall go to bed. I'm tired. Now, don't you sit up worrying over that nonsense. If you are going to worry over every word that comes from the lips of an Irish newspaperman, we shall never have a minute's peace. Get me my candle and don't sit up smoking."

"All right. I'll only finish this cigar." He got the candle and was rewarded with a kiss from lips fresh from a falsehood. They seemed to him charged with the soul of honest benediction. So may have those of Judas, divine insight apart. But Charley had no insight at all on this score, divine or otherwise.

That cigar did not last long, but it was long enough for questionings to stir in his mind, when freed from the glamour of his

wife's presence. It was all very fine—he thought—to have forgotten what McMurrough said. Lucy *had* forgotten, or she wouldn't have said she had. That truth was rooted in the nature of things. But he himself had a perfectly vivid and distinct memory of the words; all the more so for the speaker's accent, developed in his hearing for the first time. But for that, the mere words might have been—*might* have been—his imagination. But how imagine a full-blown Irish brogue, that had lent itself to exaggeration?

He remembered distinctly. The speaker plighted himself to something he would kape in mind. What was it? Charles fidgeted uneasily, for was it not something Lucy had just charged that Irishman not to forget? He turned angrily on the thought. Had she not just disclaimed all recollection of those words? Did not that settle the matter?

He recalled another occasion when . . . No!—not when a doubt crossed his mind at all, but when he nipped in the bud one that was trying it on—a doubt that, if indulged, might have shaken his faith in his wife's veracity. It was after old Moring had said that an acquaintance—surely this very McMurrough—had had the information on which that paragraph was based from Dr. Carteret's family. Or—and this was the disturbing point—from a friend of that family. Why—what other friend of that family was there who knew of it at the time, except himself?

The solution of the difficulty would have been easy, if a little disappointing and unpleasant, had it not been for his wife's denial of what seemed the upshot of her interview with McMurrough. He at least would have put a lenient construction on her conduct if she had admitted indiscretion, partly the result of her underrating the necessity for silence. She had only to plead that she had had no idea that he was so much in earnest. He could have excused her to Fred, and taken the blame on himself. But how about her disclaimer of Mr. McMurrough? That could only be accounted for by a sort of impossible oblivion on her part of the actual facts. Any other theory was nonsense that imputed falsehood to *her*. And what other theory was there that did not? Oh no—*she* was all square! Less familiar language would have said blameless or immaculate.

Anyhow, it was his clear duty to brush away the smallest stain from the image of her that he cherished in his heart. No suspicion of a suspicion of her was to be tolerated. How could he make his mind quite easy on this score? He had finished his

cigar, but he could not go to bed until he had decided on the safest course to take.

Get at McMurrough, of course! But how? To call on him and ask him questions would be much too *flamboyant* a proceeding. But why not ask old Moring to get the information for him? After all, he was much more likely to speak freely to Moring.

There was an *escritoire* at hand, with clean note-paper, suggestive and tempting. Charley stood at the desk to write on it, thereby to impress upon himself the incidental, touch-and-go nature of the transaction. He nearly spilled the ink to carry this out effectually. His note was written on the same lines, as thus:—"Dear Moring—If you chance across Mac whatever his name was—you know the man I mean—the Irish editor—try to get out of him who it was told him about Dr. Carteret's disappearance two years since. Let it alone if he shuts up about it. It doesn't really matter if I never know, but I have a fancy to do so." And its writer remained sincerely Mr. Moring's.

He folded, enveloped, and enclosed it, directing it to his recollection of the gentleman's town address; pocketed it and stole away upstairs, slipperless lest half a creak should disturb incipient night's rests near at hand; and utilised the fact that he had written it as an anodyne against his own unrest, the natural outcome of that interview with his wife. He slept soundly, and in the morning pooh-poohed himself for having written it. However, he put it in a side pocket, leaving it an open question whether he would or would not post it.

It was by a bare chance that this question was decided in the affirmative. For when he arrived at Waterloo, having two other letters "to post as soon as possible"—a special instruction from Lucy—he failed to observe the difference between two and three; and licked a third stamp—Now, everyone who has tried it knows what it is to be afflicted by a licked stamp. He has to stand beside it and keep curiosity at bay, to say nothing of malignant interference tending to double its licked side on itself. Charles, left alone with the fruits of his rashness, saw nothing for it but to complete, or have this stamp stick to the inside of his pocket-book, a perpetual monument of his blunder. Never mind!—he needn't post the letter. Besides, there was always hot water.

But nothing equals the suggestive powers of a stamped letter that is not to go, nor their persistency. It is the appeal of the quintessence of the most perfect helplessness, to power within

such easy reach in a civilised community! He who stands at the yawning mouth of a pillar letter-box, with such a missive in his hand, has to make a distinct struggle to abstain from posting it. He will probably give in, unless his reason is convinced of the necessity for abstention. In this case Charles was under no such conviction; indeed, it seemed to him a matter of indifference, except in so far as that it might save Mr. Moring some trouble if he left the letter unposted. But then, had he not written it? Yes—and had stuck a stamp on it. In short, the letter had its way, and may have chuckled over its success, if malicious. For it was *not* a matter of indifference, whether it was posted or not.

To Fred, that day was miserable enough. It would have been worse, certainly, if the need for activity in matters relating to his departure had not kept him constantly on the alert. But it was bad enough as it was.

One thing hung on his mind constantly—a haunting terror! He had still to see his friend for the last time. He had to say farewell for ever to that old Past that had been theirs in common—at School, at the 'Varsity, in the World; to speak his last word to the other half of that old friendship of near twenty years. And the completeness of this sundering—here was the very worst of it!—known only to himself; his friend all unsuspecting ignorance! But how immeasurably worse that Charley should suspect! That would indeed be the cruelest sting to bear of all. But what earthly good could come of his enlightenment? Nothing—it could only make three lives miserable instead of two.

Then a new oppression was upon him. Was not this solicitude for Charley disloyalty to her? His heart said yes it was, but turned sick and recoiled from thought. His mind crushed out a repetition of the question, and then was silent. For how, if he let this influence him, could he account to his mother for the change of purpose it was sure to produce? She was actually preparing to leave early to-morrow, urged by him to do so.

Therefore, through all that morning and most of that afternoon Fred lived in a turmoil of self-reproach and conflicting emotions, intersected by the activities of the position. He had to wind up episodes, and go to shops. A man is more wedded to his shops than a woman. He does not expect, blindly, to be able to buy all he wants in Paris. His mind misgives him about such things as shirts and collars, for instance. So a journey to Holborn swallowed up the morning, for Fred. And a council of war about the Anti-Vibration Engine with Mr. Strongitharm

—who was in earnest about it—and some opulent friends, at an office in Queen Victoria Street, accounted for most of the afternoon. A small remainder was absorbed by a visit to a patent-agent to talk over the advantages of a world-wide patent, to secure profits on non-vibration throughout Europe, Asia, Africa, and America. Then Fred said to himself—was he to be content with the meagre provisional farewell he had said to Charley the day before, or go back to the diggings, where he knew his friend would call in the hope of bearing him away to The Cedars? Far better than either to grasp his nettle. It would make his refusal to go there infinitely easier if he looked in at Trymer's to record it.

Trymer's was close at hand, too. A young man, in a railed-off office, asked an elastic tube if Mr. Snaith was disengaged, and interpreted a gurgle in its intestines as an affirmative. Would Mr. Carteret step upstairs? He would, and did. Charley met him at the door of his particular room. "That's a good boy," said he. "Come to say he's ready for his dinner—or will be."

Fred stood still shaking his head, instead of entering the room. "No go, old chap!" said he. "Must go to the mother!"

Charley stood looking at him with a falling face. "I suppose what must be must," said he. "But come in and explain."

Fred did so. The substance of the explanation was that although it would be theoretically possible for him to come to dinner, stay the night, and join his mother next day at Charing Cross Station, the scheme scarcely came within the bounds of practice. Even supposing he forsook his mother and left her to shift for herself, he would have to be up almost prehistorically early in the morning to catch the tidal train. Moreover, goods ordered that day would not arrive in time for packing—for that would have to be finished in the next two hours—and would have to be forwarded.

Always stick to big reasons why. If you let in a little one, it will be snapped at by the Opposition, and treated as your leading article. Charley's legal instinct seized on this abject little reason about the goods, and flaunted it in Fred's face as though he had advanced it as exhaustive. "What diabolical rot!" said he. "As if I couldn't send your ready-mades on as soon as ever I know your hotel? You come along with me and don't be an idiot."

Fred had to discard his feeble little argument. "I dare say I can make shift about the ready-mades, as far as that goes."

But my mother expects me to-morrow morning at eight, and I mustn't disappoint her. Go I must!"

Charley could not but acquiesce. But he pulled a long face over it. "You're quite right, old chap!" said he. "I see that. All the same I shall catch it hot for not bringing you back to-night." He broke into a good-humoured laugh as he added:—"You've no idea, young feller, how popular you are in some quarters. You ought to feel flattered."

The excruciation to Fred of Charles's unconsciousness was like a knife edge. He was quite at a loss for the sort of mock-affectionate, anything-but-serious speech that he would have been so ready with had his friend's insight into their relatives been truer. What so natural as a quasi-loving message, the more exaggerated the better, to the wife of a friend who had been more than a brother to him for so long, under existing circumstances? What so difficult as to utter it to the unruffled unsuspicion of the serene face before him? His "How do you know how flattered I don't feel, old man?" was as good a performance as could have been expected, all things considered. Fred's continuation:—"Good job I'm not going away for thirty-thousand years!" met the case without overtaxing his conscience. Hyperbole is often a great lubricant to embarrassment.

"When do you expect you *will* be back?" Charley asked, coming down to the practical tone of everyday life. "Fortnight or three weeks, I suppose?"

"Thereabouts. But a good deal depends on my mother. She may like to stop on. I fully expect she'll appreciate new surroundings, when she gets them. Take her out of the way of thinking of . . . of it, don't you know?"

"I know."

"She frets fearfully still, and will always do so wherever she is. But change of scene will certainly keep it at a minimum."

"I quite agree with you."

"Apart from that, and in the natural order of things, I don't suppose I shall be away more than the inside of three weeks." He felt quite a full-blown liar as he said these words.

"Very well!" Charles said. "Three weeks nominally. But good Lord!—as if I didn't know my fellow-creatures! Once they get abroad, they are in no such a mighty hurry to come back."

This seemed to imply that the speaker recognised British islanders alone as his fellow-creatures. "Suppose we make the three weeks six? Just to be on the safe side, you know!"

Fred felt a worse liar still as he pooh-poohed this limitation. "Six be blowed!" said he. "I oughtn't to reckon on three. Why—what's to become of business? No—you'll see me back here, like a bad shilling, before a month's out, certainly. Even if my mother took to it, and decided to find an anchorage abroad for a time, I should have to come back and make arrangements." This circumstantial effrontery was a climax in lying. Fred felt that he was acquiring skill in the Art.

We all know the last moments of a parting interview—how we feel it an imperative duty to make the most of them, and how often we spoil them outright by the strenuousness of our efforts. We know how we get our last farewells said too soon, and leave an awkward blank we cannot find a use for. Then it is that an inexorable train that will not wait becomes as it were a finger of Providence pointing to the door of our departure.

But this is when we are cocksure of our return. How many of us ever have to undergo a bona-fide parting, under a guarantee that we shall never meet again? Even Death itself is no security for that. On this occasion, for one of the men concerned, a cruel knowledge made their severance as good as Death; and he clung honestly to every moment that was left, always conscious that the next one might be the last. But the other, serene in his security that the six weeks, blowed or otherwise, would cover his friend's absence, perhaps twice over, was so far from wishing to prolong the interview, that he saw nothing to be gained by doing so, and looked at his watch. After all, there was a train he mustn't lose; and this train was, to Fred, much like the thumb of Providence, turned downwards as inexorably as a Roman thumb to condemn a gladiator. Charley got up to go.

"Well!" said he, "I must hook it. Good-bye, old chap! Pleasant journey! Come back robust, please! Another man, as the saying is. I shall tell Lucy she may look out for you in about three weeks' time."

"I'm looking all right," said Fred, with misgiving that his looks were betraying him. "At least, I'm *feeling* all right. Missed my tea—s'pose it's that! . . . Yes—expect me in about three weeks. . . . What? Yes—you must say adieu to the missus for me. Make out the best case you can for me." Fred was up to his neck in falsehood by now.

"All right! Love and a kiss, and you won't do so any more. I know. Now I must catch my train. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" Fred had winced so over the items of his embassy, as recited, that he had managed only an uneasy:—"That sort of thing! You know!" in response. Why—think of it! Suppose Charley had known!

He accompanied him down the prison-stair and saw him into his cab, that awaited him—for there were still hansoms in those days—and stood beside it with his eyes fixed for the last time on his friend, his mind half wandering back through their twenty years of friendship. In that short span of time, no longer than the driver needed to fold the Pink 'Un he was reading and consign it to a side-pocket, it had hovered through a mist of early schooldays,—all memories fairly clear there—a less transparent one of their University life, and a very cursory acknowledgment of the London days that followed. Until a something came into the dream that made havoc of all other memories, and left him in the bare cold day, to struggle with its crude realities. A flash of two dark eyes, burning into his soul under lash and lid that drooped as though to spare him the full strength of their dominion; a flood of warm dark hair, rich in its power to bind and hold a human heart, every lock a fetter; a hand whose palm was surely vitality itself. He strove against that something, and for the moment was himself, parting from his friend, whatever slavery his memories might entangle him in as soon as he was left alone.

"It's good-bye then, for three weeks or so," says Charley as a wind-up.

"That's about it," is Fred's mechanical reply. He can think of so little to say, that he welcomes any crude and obvious thing that comes to hand. "I'll write from Paris. But don't expect to hear before Tuesday." Something is strange in his own voice as he himself hears it.

Something in his appearance too, to the occupant of the cab. For the latter is not content to part without comment upon it. "I say, young man," he says, "I'll thank you to come back looking better in three weeks than you look now. However, bye-bye!"

"Do I look queer?" says Fred, with a creditable laugh. "Shouldn't know it by the feel! But good-bye!" The two right hands meet again for a final shake, over the closed cab-lid. The cab hints collectively, at the instigation of the driver, that it is time to be off, but the hand outside seems loth to release the other. It only does so when a stern peremptory question:—"Waterloo, did you say, or Charing Cross?" comes from the

THE OLD MADHOUSE

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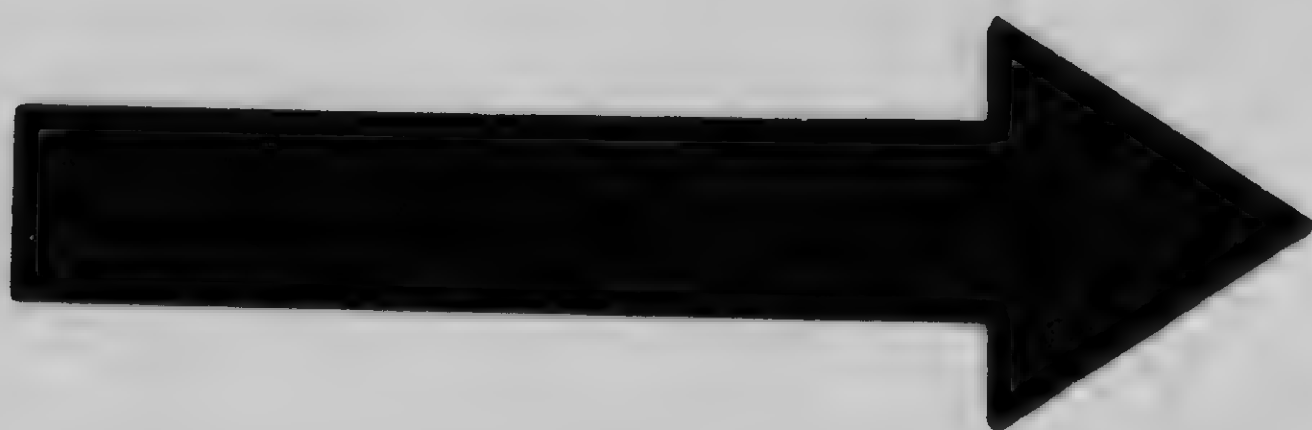
sky, and suggests that this is a much-tried cabman—his temper shortened by unreasonable fares.

Fred went slowly up the prison-stairway, and back to his room. The way he collapsed on his sofa and remained idle and motionless, watching the sunlight on the buildings opposite, that was doing more for them at the end of a summer day than their architect's imagination had bequeathed to them, was not due to fatigue, but to a sort of despair. He had parted with his old friend for good, as far as all but a correspondence, always in disguise, could fix its date. There would be an interregnum of letter writing, of course, but time would see it die down, like other things human. Then Charley would no longer be, at all, for him.

Yet there was no other way, and he had done right.

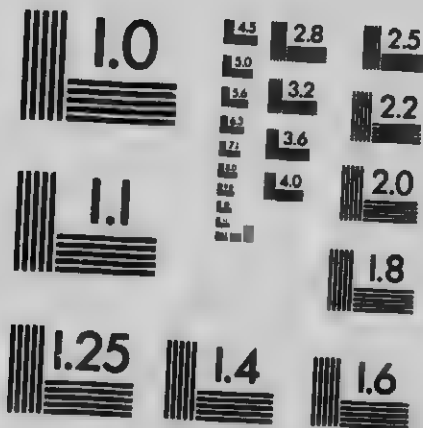
But was it conceivable that he should ever see Charley again? He could imagine a possibility of such a thing, in his present despairing mood, which shrank from no calamitous anticipation; seeing that all was calamity, for him, in his own future. Suppose that Lucy were to die—how then?

He pictured himself on his way from some remote corner of the world, to reclaim and reinstate his old friendship, whose surviving links would by that time have dwindled down to short perfunctory four-page letters. He could forecast the gradual *dégringolade* of correspondence with Charley, the latter holding on courageously, like himself; but none the less, dying down year-by-year. He could imagine a long series of reports of the growth, School and 'Varsity career, and finally courtship or courtships, of the contents of that cradle at The Cedars. His mind took kindly to the interruption of this young man's nuptials with an American millionheiress of startling beauty, by his mother's untimely death. But it foresaw a long lapse of time, even then, before the occurrence of an event it dwelt on with a sort of heartbroken satisfaction, concerning two old men who stood by a grave made long ago, one of whom, somehow himself, told the other, who had been Charley, how he had fled for both their sakes from the woman whose remains it held, at the bidding of a passion that had overmastered his reason. But his mind did not leave the stage of imagination blank, without providing a sort of afterpiece, with fireworks, of recognition of his own noble self-sacrifice, and the righteousness of the resolute way in which he had grappled with the inevitable, and knocked it out!—or, if not quite that, had at least outgeneralled Providence, whose Inscrutable Ways had for once met their match.



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How much of egotism there was in this dreaming may be inferred from the fact that the graveyard scene in the drama was a real solace to the dreamer, who went back and back to it. He roused himself from visionary aimlessness at last, to meet the need for leaving his house in order, so that whoever had the task of shifting his belongings—to dispose of them somehow, not settled yet—might find it an easy one. He had not much trouble in doing this as far as his professional plant was concerned, for chaotic untidiness was not among his failings. Some people are Chaos itself, even when endowed by Heaven with Genius. He had no difficulty in systematizing the voluminous drawings of the great Machine, whose patent he was assigning to Mr. Strongitharm and a syndicate that could put money down, cornucopiously, if plenty more was coming. But things that belong nowhere, that evade categories, are much more trouble than bulky things that fill wardrobes and lend themselves to classification.

Fred had half-an-hour left before starting with his travelling traps for Maida Vale, where he had told outfitters to send sundries which he sanguinely hoped to stuff into the top of his box. He had opened every drawer, looked in every cupboard, felt round every shelf his eyesight could not be even with, and was just about to summon a cab when a locked drawer, unexamined for insufficient reasons, forced itself on his notice, seeming to say:—"I contain something. Open me!"

"Yes," said Fred aloud, as if the drawer had really spoken. "Of course you do! Now what the dickens am I to do with that? Can't sell it. Can't give it away." He discovered a key on a bunch, and opened the drawer. The thing in question was a ring in a casket—his affiancing present to Cintra Fraser! Of no practical use now. Not to be given away, without slighting Cintra. Not to be sold, on any terms.

The little casket had been shelved unopened on the day of its arrival, and ignored rather than forgotten because of this very unadaptability. Now Fred felt disposed to look at it, as a preliminary to a decision of its destiny. Even so Mr. Micawber decided to look at the Medway. Fred slipped off a rubber ring that alone remained of the casket's enclosures, pinched it, and the lid sprang up. Why was there a little slip of paper, folded, inside the lid? With writing on it too! Fred opened it, and read: "With thanks, for all that! Cit Fraser."

Fred felt that he changed colour, and was glad that there was no one else in the room to see. But, after all, what did it matter,

that five words, not meant for an answer, should have lain unanswered and unnoticed for two years, forgotten in the dark? If he had opened the casket then and there, what response could he have made? None.

He had said to himself, a thousand times since then, that it was Cintra, not he, that had put an end to their engagement. But he was always this much unconvinced, that he had invariably found himself, shortly after, saying it again. If it was true, why did it call for so many repetitions? If it was false, what good end would have been served by their engagement ending in marriage? That the result of that insane joint-household scheme would have been a development of all the present evils in a worse form, he did not doubt. But where was the guarantee of safety in a measured and limited intercourse between the two couples? He pictured to himself an unnatural constraint upon his intercourse with Lucy, an excruciating clash between the blind confidence of dear old Charley, that would have made them brother and sister at least, and the warrantable jealousy of a wifehood that would have demanded undivided love, over and above the mere prosaic fulfilment of a husband's duties as interpreted by current domesticity. Cintra would have wanted his whole heart for herself, and would it have been his to give? It may be that he answered this question too emphatically in the negative, but what right would he have had to run risks?

There had been only one thing till now that he blamed himself for—that he had not seen his own danger and fled from it while he still believed that Lucy would not guess his reason for doing so. For, before that crisis of last Sunday at The Cedars, he could at least have persuaded himself that she was ignorant of the cause of his flight. It was that terrible knowledge each had of the other's mind that prevented his saying to himself—as he would now have been so glad to do—that at least he was the only sufferer. It is a great solace to mental pain that some of it at least is vicarious—that one's own soul alone is weighed down by what would else be a burden on another's. He believed, or thought he believed, that he would have been happier had he known that Lucy was indifferent to him. Possibly he would have, but the story doubts it. It does not doubt that this accident of the casket, and the way it brought back all the incidents of two years since, added a new sting to his self-reproach.

What if Cintra . . . ? He began a question to himself, and left it uncompleted. He was not the person to word that question. A mere spectator of the drama might have done so easily

—might have said outright:—"Suppose the girl loved him all along, and was only acting against her own heart in a momentary stimulus of passionate pride?" Fred could ascribe such a thought to another, and could suggest a shorter version of its last words—mere jealousy! He half repented of it too, for w'at would love be worth that was incapable of mere jealousy—the merest of the mere?

Of course Cintra was jealous, and with reason. But would she have been less jealous, with more reason? For she surely would have had more, except his passion for his friend's wife had perished in the flames of the altar of his own Hy men. Not a very likely thing, as he saw matters now! No—whatever cause he might have for self-reproach, one thing was clear as daylight—that Cintra was well quit of him. He could never have played the part of a good husband to her. Nor to any woman, if his speech to himself, which ended his self-examination, was as well founded as he seemed to think it.

There was nothing now to prevent his starting for Maida Vale, except this embarrassing ring. He did not fancy leaving it to be dealt with by persons whom he regarded as contemporary executors, even if he could formulate directions for its disposal in a rough sketch of a last Will and Testament, to leave behind him. He would gladly have given it away, and would have presented it to Mrs. Gam, who occurred at this juncture to see him off, and take provisional charge of his keys, if it had not been so abominably valuable. Not that its value influenced him; except indeed that he could not think of any way of accounting for such profuse liberality. Mrs. Gam would probably have summoned a specialist in mental cases. Besides, this evening she had an unsettled eye, though it was impossible to determine which of the two it was. Either, being closed, would have left the other determinate and collected, however waggish. Moreover, she had with her an unpleasing child of doubtful sex, whose mission seemed to be to keep its mouth full to overflowing of cake, but to swallow none. Fred decided against leaving Mrs. Gam in a position of any responsibility. He preferred to leave his rooms virtually under the guardianship of his friend Mr. Snaith, who would communicate the date of his return to Mrs. Gam, as soon as he knew it himself, to the end that she should do out the rooms and make them smell of soap and disinfectants, to welcome him back after his painful experience of the tainted atmosphere of a Continent whose aversion to a regular good clean out is well known to all true Britons. It was no use, Mrs. Gam

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said, her pretending that she ever did take, or could take, to the nasty ways of foreigners. But this was a good deal due to the courage and truthfulness of her disposition, and her aversion to false pretence of any sort. She had never been able to abide them and their ways, nor yet anything underhanded. She claimed probity as an attribute of her countrymen; admitting, however, that, for them who liked change, there was something to be said for intermittent flights among the Frenchified populations of foreign parts, if only to see the contrast, and become alive to our insular blessings. Only, all she said was, rather them than her!

"Very well then, Mrs. Gam," said Fred. "That's understood. You're not to be compelled to visit foreign parts against your will, but I'm to go away for a change. I shall be back in about a month's time, and then Mr. Snaith will give you my key and turn you in to clean and tidy to your heart's content. I shall expect to find the place as fresh as the top of the Matterhorn."

"I beg your pardon, Sir," said Mrs. Gam with dignity. "But which place was it you said?"

"The top of the Matterhorn."

Mrs. Gam drew herself up to her full height, to yield nothing to the Matterhorn. "I 'ope so, I am sure!" said she with a powerful accent on the absence of an H in her verb. "I should 'ope to give *every* satisfaction."

"Very good then, *that's* settled! Now let me into Mr. Snaith's room, as you have the key, and call me a cab. I want to leave a note on his table." Mrs. Gam complied.

There was Charley's room, in the last glow of the summer evening. The last sight of it Fred would ever have, miracle apart! There was the gate-legged table, all corkscrew, that he had given his friend, years ago, that his room might not look entirely Philistine. For Charley, left to himself, *was* Philistine, alas! How many a time had the two young men breakfasted at that table, conveying a sort of intimation to Fate each time that she might do her worst, but college life should never cease! What was it that had come between them, to give cruel Fate a helping hand? What was *she*—rather?

There she was, on the walls, on the table, on the chimney shelf beside the clock! Where was she not, so far as her image could be said to be herself, and so far as the camera could be relied on. For one of Charley's great delights was to get a new photograph of his wife, and a copy was always in evidence at

the diggings, framed and glazed if a notable success; otherwise, a hand in an album *passe-partout*. He had copies, too, at his place of business, to refer to. But these were hidden away in drawers, not to distract his attention from his clients. Here, whichever way he turned his eyes, he saw Lucy. And it was she that was driving him away from his Past, into a mist that he abhorred, known to him now only as his Future.

If he could have waked to find this all a dream—a long dream, two dream-years long—how he would have rejoiced! Where would he have had it begin? Clearly enough, just before his introduction to those eyes with the drooping lids, in the photograph on the table; those lips that parted to smile dutifully at the camera, on the chimney-piece; that form its enclosure said so much about to the hand that lay upon it, a tale to be passed on to the next palm it pressed, in that full length the dying sunlight caught; near the window. To wake up now, and find that all these things had been unrealities, what joy that would be! And this for all that they had been fraught, for him, with the sweetest experience possible to man! For such a waking would not drag him from its possible fruition, but only from a worse version of the tortures of Tantalus.

Yes—he would like to hark back in time that much, and to meet after that waking the new *fiancée* of his friend, and find her all his heart could wish for that friend. A perfectly delightful girl, all sweetness, honour, generosity. And beauty, if you will, but in reason; grace, but bearable grace, that would not drive a man mad! Charley would have been just as happy with any woman his heart had chosen, as with the one chance had brought him. What had he to gain, so long as she was perfect in his eyes, by a dangerous fascination that entangled others in the meshes of their own passions, a mirage that led them astray in a desert where there was no hope of an oasis? Then, who could say that his own fidelity to his first love would not have remained unshaken? If this all proved a dream, and he woke now, would it not be to look forward to his next welcome at Gipsy Hill, a whole-hearted lover? He thought now with shame—a shame he was half ashamed of—of his earnestness about Cintra in those early days, and with a pity for her that he silenced as insulting. Cintra was no child; a woman with a will of her own, and a clear insight into his character, her position—all the facts of the case. She would be much happier as Mrs. Lomax . . . and so on.

Anyhow, this was no dream—that was certain! His hand

closed in proof on the corners of that casket in his pocket. He had had an idea of leaving it on Charley's table with a note, asking him to take charge of it till his return, so as to make sure it should fall into no stranger's hands. But on reflection he did not see his way to wording an explanation of it and his reasons, offhand. So he changed his mind and left it in his pocket. He could explain it to his mother, and leave it with her jewellery, which would go in the plate-chest to the Bank.

What then? He had seen Charley for the last time, Lucy for the last time—that was his judgment and belief—and now he had to say good-bye outright to all his past. For, come what might, he could never go back upon it. This was to be farewell.

Mysterious sounds of bumps, and of a hoarse hireling denouncing staircases, showed that Mrs. Gam had grappled successfully with the situation, and was helping to get the boxes on the cab. There was only just room, but the driver was "accommodatin'," and could see round a group of luggage "you wouldn't have thought possible to." So, after yielding to a claim for overpayment by the hireling on account of the peculiar shape of that staircase—which was exactly like any other staircase—and satisfying Mrs. Gam beyond her deserts, Fred was off, and on his way to forget—to attempt it, at least—all that had made up his early life. His heart was heavy at the thought, but his eyes were closed to everything but the need for escape—escape from surroundings that made for self-torture. He knew that changed scenes and the stir of new life about him would make matters better than *this*.

He had no chance to brood over the situation, as most of his drive to Maida Vale was needed to convince the cabman that he did *not* want to be driven to any railway station whatever, the said cabman having a rooted belief that it was impossible that any person with luggage could want to be taken anywhere else. He conceded the point, however, saying resignedly:—" 'Ave it your own way, then. Only don't go orf in a 'uff and say I didn't arsk you."

CHAPTER XXX

THAT letter that Charley had posted to Mr. Moring on his way to town, on the Friday morning that occurs in the last chapter, produced no reply at the time, and Charley concluded that it must have miscarried. As he had hesitated about posting it, he did not take its disappearance to heart. The two things together had bridged over that inexplicable incident of the Irishman at the play, by giving his wakeful inquisitiveness an excuse for a nap in the first place, and in the second by postponing indefinitely the hour of its awakening.

Indefinitely, but not finally; though indeed long enough for Charley to have forgotten nearly all about it. It was not until August gave Themis leave to knock off work and go abroad that he was reminded of the incident by receiving a reply to his letter, and so much time had elapsed, and so unconnected with his surroundings at the moment was its subject, that he had to undergo some reminiscence before he could understand why the dickens Moring was writing him such a long screed. For he looked at the signature before he read the missive.

He *was* abroad when he got it—there was no doubt of that! For no such aroma of coffee ever permeated the salon of a London hotel as the one that rose from the black-and-white torrent Jules the waiter poured into the thickest possible cup on the whitest possible table-linen at his hotel in the Avenue de l'Opéra, while he examined the directions of his forwarded letters with a delicious sense that hurry and business were things of the past, and breakfast was the very essence of leisure. At no London hotel would a cavalry officer with a scabbard have finished his breakfast half a cigar ago, and that cigar such a black and strong one. Nowhere in Piccadilly or Jermyn Street, though one spent a week searching their hostels, could one find middle-aged dames of such a diameter, or capable of such an amazing rapidity of speech as sundry voluble samples that fluttered about, like very solid butterflies, in the Hôtel de l'Étoile—suppose we call it?—in those days, and perhaps do so still. The story hopes so. But they are never seen in these islands. Or is it that they shrivel and become dumb, because of Sunday, when they rashly pay them a visit?

Charles was abroad by the wish of his wife, who adored Paris—small blame to her; the story does so too—and had not been there since their honeymoon. She had to all appearance accepted his version of Fred's intention—to come back in a month at most—and with it the consolations for his absence that her husband was not backward in offering to her. "Cheer up, sweetheart!" he would say when he suspected she was missing her baritone. "He'll be back by the time we are. The music will keep, and be all the better for keeping." For he felt Fred's absence as much on her account as his own.

She had, however, disclaimed any desire to overtake Fred and his mother in Paris when she expressed a wish to spend a week there before going on to the Dolomites, which had seemed good as a place to spend an autumn holiday. Her motive was entirely love of Paris. Nevertheless, she had felt a strong disposition to go round to Fred's hotel—very near at hand—after the table-d'hôte, to find if he and his mother were not still there. Therefore after dinner she and Charley had turned out into the electric daylight of the Avenue de l'Opéra, and made their way to an hotel whose name the story recollects imperfectly, but Hôtel de l'Éternité et d'Espagne will do, as will Rue Champs des Petits Poiss for the street it stood back in. It was a scrap of old Paris, whose *salle-à-manger* had once been a coachhouse for diligences; from whose courtyard they had adventured out into cobble-paved streets by the light of flambeaux. But lapse of an hour or so may part us from anything whatever as inexorably as a century, and when Charley and his wife reached the Hotel of Spain and Eternity, they found that Fred and his mother had gone away that morning, and were not quite certain whether they should stop at Basle or go on to Italy. So they were just as much things of the past, at that hotel, as the vanished diligences of a hundred years ago.

However, this was on the evening of their arrival, and it was next morning at breakfast that he received Moring's letter; for they had broken their journey at Rouen for a couple of days, and he had left word for all forwarding to be to his Paris hotel, as above.

"Yes—Moring," said Charles to his wife across their table. "What can he have to fill up four pages?"

"Why don't you read it and see?"

"Well—of course I can do that. Wait a minute till I've looked through these others, and then we'll do Moring." He glanced through other letters, and found nothing of interest.

Lucy did not show the least concern. What was Mr. Moring to her? A dim recollection of elderly respectability, with good connections. Nothing more.

She was recalled to a more vital interest in him, when her husband, having begun his letter this time in earnest, commented on its first paragraph. "Of course! It's that Irish chap I wrote to him about." Then he went on reading, like you and me when we get a letter, and never considered the curiosity his words might have aroused in his hearer.

Might have, but apparently had not. At least, his wife never showed any, but went on reading a letter she herself had received by the same post. Certainly she said:—"Ye-es—what does he say about him?" But it was in a drawling, indifferent way that as good as said:—"This is merely civility, for your Irish chap does not interest me in the least."

Had she felt any curiosity, Charley's absorption in his letter might have irritated her. For he not only read to the end, with a deepened gravity and a bitten lip, but turned back and read it through a second time. Then instead of divulging its contents, as might have been expected, he—so to speak—washed his hands of it; thrusting it first into its envelope, then both abruptly into his pocket.

She said with languid enquiry, through the continuous reading of her own letter:—"Well—what's the mystery?" It was rather as though she felt a remark was called for than as if she cared for an answer.

"Oh—nothing—nothing! What's yours?"

"Only mamma. Says she may go to Harrogate. Only not unless Adela comes. I thought she and Adela were at daggers drawn." A certain accent on Mrs. Bannister Stair's christened name showed that she was echoing her mother's reference to her—not exactly mockingly, but not far short of it.

"Yes—I remember you thought they had been fighting that time we met her coming out. After the play about the young woman. What have they got to fight about?"

"I haven't the remotest idea." This wasn't true, so the speaker ran away from her words as quickly as possible. "All plays are about young women, but I know the one you mean. . . . Now, the question is, what are we going to do? I want to go to the Opéra Comique this evening, so wherever we go we must take tickets first."

"They'll get us places from the hotel. If they can't or

won't, we can get them. That's all right enough. But where do you want to go now?"

"The Beaux Arts, if it's open."

"Not sure that it is. However, it either is or isn't. We can ask at the bureau. If it isn't, what I should like would be loafing—crossing over the bridges—sitting about in the Champs-Élysées—fooling about the Bois de Boulogne in a fee-arker. . . ."

"Don't be a goose! Well—only geese pronounce French wrong on purpose. . . . However, I don't mind going about when it's fine. It may rain to-morrow." So it was settled, and they walked as far as the Arc de Triomphe and then took a vehicle which Charley obstinately mispronounced, and drove to the Bois de Boulogne.

The Bois de Boulogne was very like itself in August, and meant to be too hot for anything by midday. There was, however, still time, as it was not ten o'clock yet, to dismiss the mispronounced vehicle and walk about for an hour under the trees. This course recommended itself, as a sort of preliminary to a period of unlimited leisure—Lincoln's Inn Fields a mere tradition of a half-forgotten past, remote and dim! It was not resolved on until they had been trundled at a foot's pace—the horse's foot's—to nearly the centre of the Bois. Thence they could easily return at the pace of other feet—their own—to the gate they had entered by, and there find another vehicle to get them back in time for lunch at the Étoile. They could sit on this seat till it was time to start back, and look at the water.

Charley, thinking in such French as came to hand—he felt bound in honour to do so—decided that Lucy was looking *ravis-sante*. He had never considered that she looked ravishing, in English. It was much too heavy an expression. The French word touched her identity delicately. He sat looking at her, not at the water. Then he lit a cigar and said simply:—"Ripping!" as an expression of general contentment. It might have pleased him better that she should feel a more active interest in him; but then, did he not know that his nose stood in his way? He felt confident that he could live down that nose.

She was languidly interested in Parisian life. "It is the strangest thing," she said, "but whenever I come here I find identically the same child in the same perambulator, in charge of the same *bonne*, with the same little elder brother and sister. And the same mamma, if it's a little later in the day. I suppose it's too early for her now."

"I suppose a mossao in Hyde Parl' thinks he sees the same kids every time."

The lady did not seem to think this touched the point near enough to call for an answer. She changed the subject of set purpose. "What was your letter this morning?" said she.

"Which letter? I had several." He shied off the letter from Moring, all the while longing for any light that would penetrate its mystery. For it had brought him face to face with a seeming-insoluble problem.

"You know which. The one from that man. The one that made you look so."

"Look how?"

"Well—cross. Irritated. What was that in Colonel Quaqq—about the bull?" This referred to the story of the Grace-walking Brother, which probably you have read. They had; or rather, Fred had read it aloud to them, some while since.

Charley filled out the quotation. "Did I look like a bob-tailed bull in fly-time?" said he, laughing good-humouredly. "Well, I was puzzled—that's the truth!" But it made him easier that she should be persistent about that letter. It pointed to an explanation of its contents. He would get it before showing her the letter, if indeed he did show it at all. "You know, I had written to him to ask him to find out, if he could, where that Irish editor chap had got the story of Dr. Carteret's disappearance."

If she started, and changed colour slightly, it counted for nothing; he could explain that away by the suddenness of his reference to the gruesome subject they had left behind in England. When she spoke, it was without any apparent consciousness of personal concern. Her "Was he able to tell you anything?" was a perfect model of the interest civility calls for when the affairs of others, none of ours, are under discussion.

Charley felt hopeful about his explanation. "Something," said he, allowing the disposal of a long cigar-ash to bespeak his attention for a moment. "Stop a minute! . . . Yes—something. . . . That'll do. It won't show. But it spoils one's garments if it gets rubbed in. . . . Yes—he told me something—but he couldn't find out what I wanted to know. O'Dowd or O'Toole or O'Rourke—whichever he is—wouldn't give up his informant, because he was bound to secrecy. But he stuck to it that he had it from an intimate friend of the family."

There was distinct relief on the beautiful face. Mr. McMorough was to be trusted, then! She could safely develop her

detachment from any share in the affair. "He must have had the story from the school people," said she. "He might easily describe them as friends of the family."

"It lies," said Charley, "between the school people and ourselves. So it must be the school people."

"Must be. There's no way out of it."

"You are absolutely certain you did not give him so much as half a hint?"

"Stupid man! How could half a hint have supplied him with all that paragraph?"

"That's true, sweetheart. Sharp you are!" He was by this time beginning to feel ashamed that although he had certainly not entertained a suspicion, he should have gone so far as to answer the door to one. He could make up for that though, by taking her into his confidence outright, and showing her the letter. He went on:—"However, you'll see what he says. . . . Botheration!—I hope I haven't lost that letter. I'm sure I put it in my pocket. . . . Oh no—here it is! Catch hold."

They had risen from the seat, and were standing by the water's edge. A light breeze had sprung up, to spoil the reflection of the swans, though indeed they seemed to think it more dignified to take no notice. It was great relief to the heat, and made the prospect of the midday sun more bearable. This tended to a leisurely return to their hotel. They need not hurry back.

She caught hold, and read through the letter. What she read till she came to the signature was what her husband had read. And this was it:

DEAR SNAITH: I ought to have answered your letter before. But I had to wait for an interview with the Irishman, and I did not get one till yesterday. He was apologetic for his paragraph—surprised that it should have given offence—had imagined he would be doing a service. He repeated that the information came to him through an intimate friend of the family, but admitted that this authority was not his immediate informant. He said he had been asked since then not to mention this person's name, so I did not press him for it.

My experience is that it is always impossible to trace stories of this sort home to their tellers. Everyone always says 'You will be sure to let this go no farther.' And one always repeats that caution very earnestly to the next person one tells it to.

I must say that McMurrough's motive seems to have been

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honestly to assist in tracing Dr. Carteret. He could have had no other. I think, however, I should in his place have consulted the family before rushing into print.

I hope that you and Mrs. Charles Snaith are enjoying your holiday. My very kind regards to both, as also to Fred Carteret if he is with you, which I take to be not at all unlikely.

Sincerely yours,

SEPTIMUS MUNBY MORING.

This was all that Charley had read. But his wife read a little more. For there was a postscript overleaf that he had missed. No great wonder!—for the name, as above, only just found room at the end of the third neat and closely written page, and there was no T.O. in the corner. The appearance of a wind-up was deceptive, not to mention the fact that the letter had been folded backwards, shutting the postscript in. He had missed it, but his wife caught sight of it. It ran thus:

“P.S. Perhaps I ought to mention—though I am not quite sure on the point—that McM.’s informant seems to have been a lady. He certainly said that a lady he met at the Lyceum in the stalls, had begged him not to say where he got the information. But of course it does not follow from this that she herself had told him.”

“What’s that—postscript I didn’t read?” said Charles. “Hand over!” He reached out for it, not noticing how his wife was going pale and red by turns.

She for her part was under pressure to make up her mind then and there whether it was to be confession or further concealment. Also, whether the latter was practicable. It was a very doubtful point.

What confession, and how? To say pointblank:—“I am a liar, who for months past have lied black white over a matter I might have told the truth about at the cost of a very mild rebuke”—this seemed to her an unqualified impossibility. On the other hand, what loophole of escape did further duplicity offer? None!

Yes! Destroy—get rid of—this horrible letter! She thought she saw a chance. Fortune might favour the bold, this once.

“You must make this out, Charles; I can’t. He writes one of those dreadful clear writings, that one thinks one can read, and finds one can’t. . . . Oh dear—there it goes! Catch it.”

For the letter, at the suggestion of a new gust of wind, had taken the bit in its teeth, and flown away across the water. It may have been relinquished intentionally, of course; if so, Zephyr was not to blame.

"Stop it! Wo—o—o!" said Charley, and tried to reach it across the water, but in vain. It was not worth going in over his ankles to salvage that postscript. If it had been the least important, Moring would have been sure to put T.O. in the corner of his last page. The letter, blown by the wind, was well on its way to the opposite coast in a very short time. A man in a suit of blue canvas—no: 100, if the badge on his arm told the truth—who was sweeping nothing carefully up with an osier broom whose business twigs were longer than its handle, stopped his laborious task to watch the departing voyager. "*Je le retrouve pour Madame, si M'sieu le veut. Un franc pour le bateau, et un pourboire. C'est peu!*" But it seemed to be considered *beaucoup*, especially as Monsieur said he didn't want the letter.

"I really don't think we've lost anything," said the lady. "The envelope's no use now, is it? It may as well follow the letter." She crushed it and threw it after its late occupant. It was a mistake. She should have destroyed it. She watched it for a moment, to see if a swan who had thought it might be eatable would have the courage of its opinions: then, as it had not, continued:—"What's the time? I'm sorry I was so . . ."

"So butter-fingered?" Charles laughed good-humouredly, and looked at his watch. "Twenty past eleven—hookey! I say—we ought to be getting back." They turned to go, and wandered easily towards the gate. Lucy's face showed either relief or triumph, or both.

No further reference was made to the lost letter, except that Charles said, much as though the answer was a foregone conclusion:—"I suppose you didn't make out a word of the postscript?"

"Not a word. But I didn't try very hard. I left it for you." She had better have stopped at that. But she could not be content without a finishing touch:—"Stop a minute! I think there was a long word that looked like the name of the school. . . ."

"Vexton Stultifer?"

"It looked like that. But I couldn't be sure."

"Very likely to be. Probably a guess of his about where the tale came from." Then they talked about the Eiffel Tower, and how it promoted thunderstorms, or didn't.

They could not get places at the Opéra Comique, but a box was to be had for *Divorçons* at the Folies Bergères. Charley had seen it before, but wanted to see it again. He viewed it as an awful lark, especially when the Him and the Her of it eat their little parting *dîner-de-noces* together and the waiter has to look the other way. Lucy had never seen it, but would go, to satisfy her husband, only that she suspected it of being intentionally spicy, and spiciness of set purpose always bored her. However, she would go, provided she wasn't required to rush about the whole afternoon and get fagged to death first. This was granted, and she remained at the hotel, while her husband went by himself for a long rampage all over Paris, and came back at dress-for-dinner time in great spirits, saying he didn't believe there was a street or boulevard in that vast city that he hadn't been in. Which was an obvious exaggeration.

She had not left the hotel, although she had contemplated being driven over to Vincennes, to call on the Princesse Delaforce Majeure—or some such name,—whom her mother had known in India as Annette Smithson. She seemed to have found time hang heavy on hand, and Charley reproached himself for deserting her. "Not that I should have been much use," said he, humbly, "in the way of amusement! Because I always was a slow sort of beggar. Now, what the dooce possessed Fred to go rushing away before our Term was up? He could perfectly well have waited, as far as that goes. And then you wouldn't have found it so dull. . . . Well—of course if he had come with us, he couldn't have gone with his mother too. Right you are, sweetheart!"

What was the odd look in those lustrous eyes that rested on him, rather longer than was their wont? Was it pity? The story hopes so. A sort of pity, suppose we say!

You know *Divorçons*? Every playgoer does; but, perhaps, you are not a playgoer? If you are, you may be inclined to sympathise with the view this story takes, that the lover in that play is really needlessly unattractive. Surely a magnet twice—three times—a dozen times more powerful would have been needed to detach the most frivolous of wives from so engaging a husband. Charley evidently had an impression to this effect, for he propounded the view that the lady in the play had only become reconciled to her lawful mate because of the terrible identity of the unlawful substitute to whom she stood committed—which, by the way, may only have been its actor's

endorsement of a belief, apparently common among playgoers, that no man is too repulsive an idiot to supply a co-respondent to a lady anxious to develop infidelity.

This suggestion of Charles's procured him a pleasant experience—his wife's unstinted approval. She so frequently took exception to things he said, as often as not passing them by in silence, that it was a real pleasure to him when she responded, this time:—"I entirely agree with you. If the two men had been changed across, the husband the lover and the lover the husband, she would have made short work of her marriage tie." They dwelt upon this way of looking at the matter, and endorsed it, as they rode back to the Avenue de l'Opéra.

There was a man in blue canvas, who was *no. 100*, but otherwise undefined, in the outer entrance of the hotel. Charles would have recognised him at once for the sweeper in the Bois de Boulogne, even without an introduction from the hall-porter, who spoke English quite intelligibly. "Thees ees," said he, "a working-man for M'sieur Snai-eess. He hass a lettare he hass found." The working-man seemed overwhelmed with the grandeur of the hall-porter, and indeed rather cowed by his surroundings generally. But he found his tongue, and backed it with a hoarse larynx, identifying himself by naming the place in which he occurred last, and the date of the occurrence.

"Bois de Boulogne, M'sieu, ce matin—une heure avant-midi. . . . Vous le savez, n'est-ce pas?"

"All right. Go ahead. *En avant*. I know all about it. You've got my letter." Numéro Cent understood perfectly, and was producing the letter, when Charley must needs complicate matters by endeavouring to be still more intelligible, in French:—"Vous avez trouvé mon lettre dans l'eau? Où est-il?" Which made Numéro Cent stop producing the letter, and look in bewilderment to the hall-porter who could speak English, for an explanation.

"Va bien—va bien! M'sieu vous demande sa lettre. Voilà tout! Donnez-la lui."

Numéro Cent, relieved, handed the letter, in its envelope and much the worse for its adventures, but dry, to its owner, giving as he did so a brief sketch of its recovery. "M'sieu et Madame s'en vont; et moi, dès le soir quand je laisse travailler, je vais chercher la lettre. Je cherche sur la rive au delà de l'eau. Et je cherche et je cherche, jusque pst:—là voilà sous la grille, dans l'écume. Alors l'enveloppe—je l'ai trouvée—un peu sale, oui! Mais je lis le nom de l'Hôtel . . ." The story could not

spell the pronunciation of this, if it tried. It was so mixed with some large teeth that remained of Numéro Cent's original set. But one thing was clear—that if that envelope had not followed its letter, the two would never have found their way to the Hôtel de l'Étoile. Charley's was that plain enough, but the man's speech might have been Esquimaux, for anything he understood of it.

The lady at the hotel-bureau seemed to have something to explain to the commissaire. The latter was to tell Monsieur something. Madame had felt fatiguée, and had montée par l'ascenseur to the appartement. Charles caught the meaning of this; and, turning round, saw that Lucy had not waited to hear about the adventures of the letter, but had gone upstairs to bed. He felt in his pocket for a franc to give the Numéro Cent, but found that his discharge of the cab fare had left him without small change. He said to the commissaire, with a painful intelligibility to ears accustomed to human speech, deliberately translated from the language of the speaker:—"Donnez quelque chose à l'homme, et mettez le au compte." The commissaire nodded confidentially, saying:—"Justement!" But he probably commandeered at least half the deux francs that the account afterwards described as "gratuité."

He hurried upstairs, somewhat apprehensive about Lucy, not waiting for the second coming of the lift. But on the way he opened that letter to read its postscript.

He was not prepared for it; indeed, nothing could have prepared him. He had to pass, all on a sudden, from a serene faith in his idol that no suspicion had been able to disturb, to a knowledge, complete and irresistible, of the way that she had played him false.

He read and re-read that postscript in the vain hope of reading some new meaning into it—foisting some interpretation on it that would leave him his life, give him back his faith in his idol, restore peace to his heart. At least, some gloss upon it that would hush his pulses for the moment, and quench the fire that the reading of it had started in his brain. He could not have suffered more had the crime of which Lucy stood convicted been ten times worse. What was it, after all? A promise broken and, instead of an honest confession on occasion shown, a certain amount of—what should it be called?—equivocation?—prevarication?—as a sequel. How if it had been—but Heaven forgive him for the question!—some coarse disregard of married honour, some blot that we believe possible on our neigh-

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bour's scutcheon, but find incredible on our own? . . . Oh—well—*then* he would have killed himself.

But how about *now*? What was he to do *now*, with Lucy probably postponing final retirement until he was well on his way to his own pillow? The question would not have arisen if the Etoile had been able to accommodate them with the room apiece that they had asked for. But Paris was full of a good deal of world, and what would you? Perhaps his best course would be to delay, on the chance that she would think he had met a friend, or gone to the smoking-room for a farewell pipe, in which case he might sneak noiselessly to bed at an unearthly hour. But no!—that would not do. Such proximity, and such a silence about such a rift between them, would drive him raving mad. Besides, did not she know, and know that he knew, the contents of that postscript? And could any sane man believe that Mr. McMurrough ever met another lady in the stalls at the Lyceum, and made her a promise of secrecy about this thing, or any other. Then, see what he himself had overheard!

No—no! Speak he must, and that forthwith. He crept up the flight of stairs that was still between him and his terrible task, but so slowly that the lift made two journeys in the time, shooting past him in its cage. Odd moments catch Memory by the forelock, and hold her through life. This was one such moment for Charles, and the smallest details of his surroundings were never to be absent from his image of it—or rather his efforts to forget it—in after life. Even the fact that the wide balustrade, that was between him and the *ascenseur*, was cased in Utrecht velvet was destined to remain, unchangeable.

Was this numéro deux-cent soixante-quinze their number? Yes—but there was a bootless vacuum outside the door. She was still going, not gone, to bed. The better, perhaps.

He had to make an effort, to knock at the door. But he did it, somehow; and a voice of irritating equanimity told him to come in. He wished it had shown apprehension, annoyance, impatience. Sweetness and light were terrible barriers to pass.

"What kept you so long?" This was not a complaint, by the tone; merely an enquiry, to satisfy curiosity.

"You saw who the man was?" His voice was not like itself, and there was not a trace of its usual amiable tone. Charles was gone, and another man had come in his place. She would have done more wisely to recognise this change, instead of accentuating the suavity of her manner. That was unnatural, and would have sounded overdone even if perfectly successful. But

the intrusion of a barely perceptible nervous catch in her breath spoiled all.

Also it was scarcely natural that she should not notice his unusual tone. She replied to his semi-question without turning round from the mirror in which he had seen and spoken to her pale reflected face, rather than to herself: "I saw you were speaking to a man."

"And you saw who the man was." His repetition of his own words, this time a statement of fact, not a question, was in a controlled voice, but very positive.

She threw aside disguise, and turned full upon him the two lustrous orbs that had never looked on him in anger before. They were full of it now. "Suppose I did!" said she. "What then?"

He could hardly speak, to accuse her of bald falsehood. But it was being forced home to his mind now, how she had lied in self-defence, and knew it. Why, else, a defiant manner? He threw the soiled letter on the dressing-table before her, speechlessly for the moment; then at last, after twice walking the length of the room restlessly, found his voice, to say:—"You knew the contents of that letter. You knew, I mean, what was in the postscript. You wished me not to know, so you threw it in the water that I should not read it."

"What if I did?"

"You knew that you had deceived me about what you were saying to that man we saw at the play in London. You knew, when we were on our way back to your mother's in the carriage, that you had *not* forgotten a word he said to you, nor a word you said to him. You knew that your object was to conceal from me that you—*you!*—were his informant about old Carteret's disappearance, and you tried to make me believe—only this morning—that he had the particulars from someone else." He picked up the letter from where it lay on the toilet table; and hurriedly, with a shaking hand, drew it from its envelope, and held it towards her, showing the postscript. "Can you show me now a single word in that postscript that you could possibly have mistaken for the name of the school?"

She ignored the challenge. Indeed, nothing could have been more hopeless than an attempt to find in it any words that could possibly have looked like "Vexton Stultifer." So hopeless was any direct justification of the deceptions she had practised that she had no choice but silence, or to raise a false issue. She chose the latter. "I wish you wouldn't put your filthy letter on the

clean damask table," said she, petulantly, but much as she might have done had there been no issue between them. "How do you know where it has been? Where did that man find it?"

A false air of being in the wrong went with the admission that it had been in a drain-pipe, but Charles faced it courageously. "I suppose it was an overflow pipe out of the lake," said he. "He said something about a *grille*, I believe. A *grille* is a grating, I suppose? There's been nothing worse than scum on it."

To head off a discussion about her personal veracity towards an investigation into the flavour of a piece of soiled paper that had been in very bad company, was a tactical triumph for Lucy. It might have become a strategical one—that is to say, might have voided the whole conversation—or at least thrown difficulties in the way of its renewal—but for her husband's earnestness. He was in no mood for so pitiful an evasion. When she replied to his attempt to reinstate the letter in decent society:—"Whatever it has had upon it, I do not want it on my table. Please take it away. Take it out of the room—" he felt that the difficulty of renewing the previous question would be multiplied tenfold if he complied. He cut the difficulty short by picking up the soiled letter, lighting it with a cigar-match that he took from his pocket, and laying it carefully on a patch of safe fireproof floor beside the unemployed stove. He kept watch upon it, not heeding her protests that he would burn down the hotel, and so forth, until it was a cinder without a spark. Then he flattened it with his foot to keep it still; for cinders fly. But he did not speak at once, and his silence was more effective than anything he could have said. Nothing was left of the false issue she had raised, and she had no choice between facing his accusation and leaving it altogether unanswered.

"Perhaps now," she said, "you will tell me the meaning of all this." The interlude of the burnt letter had furnished her with a plea—though an entirely spurious one—for the implication that she at least had nothing to fear from the truth, and that it was he that was shrinking from its disclosure, though ready to make insinuations about its nature.

He passed by the suggestion, as unworthy of comment.

"Lucy," said he, "listen to me! If you wish it, I will be silent; I will not say a word of your disregard of my wish that Dr. Carteret's disappearance should not be talked about. Call it a misunderstanding—call it what you will! It was a matter of small importance—less than I thought it at the time—more

a deference to a feeling of Fred's than because I judged it necessary. But why—but *why* . . . ?”

She was so anxious to cross the golden bridge his chivalry had built for her that she interrupted him. “You may well call it a matter of small importance. Why—what difference did it make? Besides, you should have made it clearer that it was a state secret. For my part I naturally thought the more publicity the better, if the old gentleman was to be hunted up . . .”

“It was not a state secret, but I should not have spoken of it to you if I had not thought it would be . . .” He stopped short and changed the words he meant to use, to get something that would slur over her offence, . . . “if I had not thought I could make my wishes clear . . .”

She struck in again, to keep touch with an accusation more easy to defend herself against than an indictment for her subsequent evasion and falsehood. “You admit then that it wasn't a hanging matter—why do you rake it up now? You might at least have waited until we were back in England, and not spoiled our holiday with horrors—all that dreadful story of Dr. Carteret's disappearance. Oh dear!—are we never to be allowed to forget it?”

He raised his voice a little, impatiently. “It is not necessary that we should speak of it. Let us keep to the point. You knew the contents of that letter I have just burned. You tried to conceal the postscript, which I had not read, by throwing it in the water. You tried then to mislead me about it, by pretending it contained a reference to Dr. Carteret's school. . . .”

Lucy was a fool here. For she thought to find shelter behind the fact of the destruction of the letter. “Who is to know that?” said she. “Why did you burn the letter? Did I ask you to burn it?”

“I know it,” said Charles, quietly, “and that is enough. No one else will ever know it—would ever have known it, from me. But that does not alter the fact that you, Lucy—you, whom I believed in—you, whom I loved and trusted . . .”

“Please no rhapsodies!”

“Very well!” He was silent a moment, as his earnestness recoiled before the half-sneer of her words. For he had not expected cynicism, or bravado, and this was very near to both. It was but a moment, and then he resumed, even more quietly than before:—“That does not alter the fact that you have been scheming to keep me in the dark—that you have been able to look me in the face with a perversion of truth on your lips . . .”

"Why not say a lie at once, and have done with it?"

He could neither accept the word, nor repudiate it. So he ignored her question, and continued:—"As you did on your way home in the carriage, that night of the play. You had completely forgotten every word this Mr. McMurrrough said. Was not that it?"

"It suited me to forget it, and I succeeded in doing so. I think that ought to be enough."

"You tried to remember what words he could possibly have used, that could have resembled what I overheard. Was that so?"

"Just as you please! Why do you keep on at me? Do you expect me to go down on my knees, and do penance? Do you expect me to cry and be frightened? Or what?"

The more she evaded any real answer to his accusation, the more determined he seemed to become to force her to look the position seriously in the face. "Dearest,"—said he—and the tone of his voice showed how he still clung to his love for her—"I expect nothing of you except your help. I ask you to help me to forgive the wrong you have done me—for it *was* a great wrong to practise deception on me, to try to keep me in the dark. What had I done to deserve such treatment at your hands? But I should not better matters by helping to hush it up—by a false pretence that no such thing had ever happened. That would only have been mutual consent to more deception in the future . . ."

She cut him short with:—"I quite agree. But what do you want *now*? That's what I want to get at." She had chosen her line of defence. It was to be that he was fanciful, suspicious, neurotic—a capital word to pooh-pooh with, that!—and that she, on the other hand, was all straightforward common sense, whose scorn of sentimentalism did not the least imply the absence of sterling qualities, whatever they are. She added, the moment she saw that he was opening his lips to speak:—"Perhaps you will have the goodness to tell me?"

He changed what he was going to say to:—"Yes—I will tell you." Then continued:—"It is impossible for us—for either of us—to pretend that what we know *has* happened has *not* happened. God knows how gladly I would join, for my part, in such a mutual deception, if anything could make it possible. . . . Do not be afraid—I am not going back on the story. You know my knowledge of it now, and that is enough for me." She may have felt a disposition to quarrel with this,

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but discretion had the best of it, and she was silent. He continued:—"I will not be what you call rhapsodical, since it displeases you. But oh, if you knew how my heart aches that there should be no secrets between us, that I should be able to look you in the face and fear no concealment—nothing in ambush behind it!" He moved uneasily about the room, and twice began to speak, and stopped, as though at a loss for words to say something he had left unsaid. Then he seemed to see his way, and began abruptly:—"I cannot tell you how much happier I should feel if . . ." and was brought up sharp by some obstacle inherent in the limitations of language.

She said, more to herself than to him:—"I know, precisely!" and the manner of her speech said:—"I could have told you all this. It is no more than I expected."

He said, enquiringly, as one who may not have heard aright:—"You—a—know . . .?" and waited.

"Yes—how much happier you would feel if I were to say I was sorry, and would not do so any more. Isn't that it?"

He answered gravely, sadly:—"That is not exactly what I meant. Let us talk no more about it." And was silent. The fact was, that a tone of semi-derision, which might have sat on a schoolgirl brought to book for a trivial fib, seemed to him out of place in a mature woman, a wife and mother, convicted of more than one direct falsehood; told, or acted, to keep him, her husband, in the dark. He had not asked for artificial penitence, but the entire absence of anything like remorse on her part whom he had made an idol of, had credited with every virtue, was a greater shock to him than angry resistance would have been. It put his idol in a new light.

What was so painful to him was that he had to fight against a suspicion that this attitude of hers showed the depth, or shallowness, of her love for him. Did she care about retaining his, at all? Indeed, had she done so, a false version of her motives would have been easy, that would have seemed all-sufficient to a man so ready to be deceived. What more plausible than that she had merely misunderstood at first the importance he attached to her secrecy about Dr. Carteret; but that, finding it out later, she had been driven to deception by terror lest he should be turned against her on discovering her untrustworthiness? Where is the man that would not have forgiven a more serious offence in a wife whose plea of guilty was extenuated by such a motive as the desire to retain his love? Charles may not have formulated such a defence for Lucy, but he certainly

felt keenly that the half-mocking, half-defiant spirit she had shown was inconsistent with his idea of a wife's love for her husband—a love that had to last through their joint lives at least.

All the chivalry of his devotion to her had clung to the idea that, with her help, and on that condition only, the opening of a gulf between them—one that might never close—would be avoided. And her help had not been forthcoming.

The way that she answered his suggestion that they should talk no more about it had no help in it either. She only said, coldly:—"I do not desire any further conversation on the subject." He did not answer, nor speak to her again except to get her assent to his switching off the electric light. On doing so he said good-night in a disheartened sort of way, and she responded formally. Those two good-nights were the last words that passed between them.

CHAPTER XXXI

As he lay there in the dark, chafing at his own bitter thoughts, gradually becoming aware of the full meaning, to him, of the worst disappointment he had ever experienced, Charles was still so tenderly thoughtful for the comfort of the woman who remained in spite of all—so it seemed to him—unchangeably his own, the sharer of all joy and sorrow in his days to come, that he was actually glad of the deep breaths that he listened for and so soon heard, coming from the curtained bed in the alcove at the far end of the room. Why should she be miserable because he was?

Rather, if anything, it tended to reinstate her in her old position of his heart's unquestioned Queen, that she should show a strange insensibility to what seemed to him the enormity of her behaviour. It was a certain childishness—so he reasoned with himself—a simplicity of character of which later in life she would recognise the perversity. Had he not himself seen—or at any rate could he not remember when he tried, as presently he might?—cases of children who combined entire sweetness of disposition with a curious unconsciousness of obligation to truth and falsehood?—Well—he had heard of such cases, anyhow!

Besides, we could not expect to eat our cake and have it too. Look how odious some perfectly truthful people were. He proceeded to credit a large class of his species with odiousness, on the strength of their combination of physical shortcomings with vulgar veracity. He wasn't thinking of Elbows Fraser; though as a matter of fact her exorbitant truthfulness did seem to belong, as it were, to—suppose we say?—very moderate feminine charms. He was not thinking of her, because of her attachment to Charles the Third. Oh dear no, it's only Lucy . . . !

However, that was idiosyncrasy—a freak of Nature. It was impossible to account for these things. Moreover, Charles the Third was almost irresistible now, and would become more so when he was—suppose we say—a little more conventional on certain points of social demeanour. Lucy had expected too much in the way of delicacy from a character who was, after all, the merest rudiment. His own indifference on these points he traced to the natural coarseness of his own fibre. But he

hoped his offspring would not presume on the existence of a similar insensibility in his lady friend, which might have its limits, although his wife had testified of her:—"Nancy doesn't mind babies, and I do. People are different." Perhaps Elbows was a freak of Nature too—a counterpart.

He felt Fred's absence keenly. When one has for years carried all one's troubles to a chosen friend, to lighten them by turning them this way and that, in confidential council; and then finds oneself cruelly face-to-face with some formidable trouble in that friend's absence, one learns what it means to be thrown on one's own resources, and very often is disgusted to find how scanty they are. Charles was far from satisfied with his stock, in this emergency. It would have been so consolatory to him to look forward to an analysis of the whole position tomorrow with Fred, an undisguised condemnation—this is what he would have liked best—of his own conduct by his friend, and an unhesitating espousal by him of the case of his wife. He wanted to be, as it were, forced into a minority against his own judgment, in order that she, spotless in his eyes till now, should be washed clean of the stain of falsehood that he could not shut his eyes to unassisted. How willingly he would have eaten humble pie to the end of her reinstatement! But he was powerless before the evidence that she had more than once—more than thrice, for that matter—lied black white to hide her own unfaith from him. He could not whitewash her, try how he might. But he would have caught gladly at the absolution of any other priest to get an excuse for his own; or, say, welcomed a verdict of not guilty in any other court to justify a condonation of the offence in his.

Was his mind only reciting a commonplace of human thought, in thus condemning a sin against himself by a woman who still held him spellbound in spite of all? Why could he not let his heart release his speech, as it yearned to do, and leave him free to say:—"I love—love—love you! What is my love worth if it does not give me the right of forgiveness, plenary and unconditional?" Was it not a mere convention of human theology, that reserves this right of complete forgiveness for a Supreme Being, who might quite excusably summon before Him all the Confessors of all the Cathedrals, all the Preachers and all the Prophets, and say to them:—"Am I to be twitted with my Omnipotence by the whole caboodle of you ever, Sunday, and not allowed to let off Sinners at pleasure without a Sacrificial Atonement and no end of fussy complications?"

Yes—a convention, if you choose to call it so. But what check would there be on persons with a natural turn for crime, if indulgence of their tastes always ended in a let-off? If the Commissioners discharged all bankrupts on principle, without an undertaking to pay anything in the pound, how long would any of us remain solvent? But at this point in his reflections Charles felt that he was drivelling—which had not occurred to him when he was involved in his Higher Metaphysic about the Almighty—seeing that there was no sort of parallelism between the cases. This culprit had no natural turn for falsehood. On the contrary she was intrinsically truthful—did he not know her soul at home, as it were? Was she not his Wife, with a capital? In her, it was no vulgar disposition towards fibs, but a puzzling individuality, to be regarded as Laputa's Royal Society regarded Gulliver, as *relplum scalcath*. It was a thing that occurs once in a lifetime, by an inexplicable accident . . . and so on.

So on for full four hours, by the counted clocks. So on with dry eyes—too dry—and a burning palate, hand-palms on fire, every movement painfully in check lest he should spoil *her* sleep, behind those curtains. Then a sudden change, and drowsiness. It just left him time to thank God—more respectfully this time—that she was still behind them there, and would be there when daylight came, and then—oblivion.

He overslept himself, of course. But not unreasonably. For a clock which he expected to stop at the seventh stroke only went on to the ninth. He started into wakefulness at the eighth, so suddenly that he had sounded his electric button one time for the *femme-de-chambre*, before he knew how late he was. Also, before he looked at the still-closed curtains of the other bed. She *was* sleeping sound, no doubt of that! But he would not wake her. Not yet, at any rate! Let her have her sleep out.

To that end he rose furtively, and explained to the *femme-de-chambre*, when she came, that he had sounded for O show. She guessed:—"De l'eau chaude?" and guessed right. He felt that the French was coming back to him—that was how he put it—and he ventured still further, saying:—"Ne faites pas un bruit pour disturber Madame." FINE the maid heard that he spoke of Madame, but was uncertain what he had said about her. She said:—"Madame est sortie deux heures passées," and he did not understand her in the least; in fact, considered she was rather a stupid FINE.

But although the sound of her words remained on his ears, especially that word "sortie," it was not until a growing wakefulness brought his attention to one or two things that struck him as abnormal in the apartment that it occurred to him to assign a meaning to them. "That young woman never meant that Lucy had gone out!" was what he said to himself, all but the more articulation of it. For one of the abnormalities was the disappearance of sundry articles of wearing apparel, notably the hat and overmantle she had travelled in, from the pegs they had hung on—he remembered them—the night before. Yes—surely he remembered them, the very last things that caught his eye when he switched the light off!

Still, she never could have got up and gone out without his hearing her. And what of the solid, unmoved look of those substantial curtains on the bed?

Till now, he had been managing to dress in studied silence—had washed himself with no more noise than a cat. Now, he tried a slight noise or two—indulged the gurgle of a water-decanter, dropped a slipper, opened and shut his cigar-case—such sounds as might legitimately hasten awakening at the end of a long sleep. No results! Not a movement in response. And those curtains might have been granite, for any stir in them he could detect.

He began to be less certain about the occupancy of the bed behind them. Still, he owed it to his previous convictions to handle the subject discreetly. He pulled the curtains an inch apart, and saw in an instant that they had been replaced carefully by the departing occupant, who had even been at the trouble of accommodating the bedclothes. She *had* got up and gone out, evidently, as the chambermaid had probably said. . . . Well—what of that?

That was all right. He would find her downstairs in the *salle-d-manger*. Probably she had breakfasted by herself, after a walk in the glorious weather, and would be sitting on at the table, waiting for him. Rather that, than that she should have departed into the *salon-de-lecture*, or elsewhere. Her prolonged stay at table would look more like peace and reconciliation than any move to another anchorage, which would involve his breakfasting alone.

Still, he had doubts enough on the point to make a parade of his confidence desirable, in its own interest. Here was a delivery of letters, just come in, at the Bureau. He would wait to see

what there was for her, and take it to her. He was in no hurry, and it would be an olive-branch.

He would also, to emphasize his confidence, open and pretend to read one of his own letters. He did so, and read it slowly, deliberately, all the length of the salon, until he arrived at the recess in which they had welcomed yesterday's morning roll and coffee. Then he looked up, and found her place empty.

"I say! . . . What the dickens . . . ?" He asked himself the question, but the waiter answered it. Madame had sortie de bonne heure, très tôt. She had commandée du café-au-lait et deux œufs à la coque, and had gone away it was more than an hour since. Of course this was all in French.

The same officer was seated at the same table, smoking to all appearance the same cigar. He came to the rescue, addressing the garçon, who stood holding Charles's chair as if it was a horse he would mount shortly—and a spirited one who needed restraint. This officer spoke English fluently, with a slight foreign accent. "Your vayeef hass gone ayvay," he said, "out off doorce. I see her go mayee-self." He tapped his breastbone to show whom he was referring to. "She told the dryvair 'à la gare.' I see 'eem drife ayvay, kveek."

"My God!" Charles felt as though he had had a blow on the head, and the room went round. He was not aware that he staggered, but guessed it when the officer put his cigar suddenly but carefully on a plate with half-a-franc on it, and came across to guide him into the chair the garçon continued to offer. He was a garçon uninterested in the life-dramas of the hotel's guests, except in so far as they affected his emoluments.

"Cognac—p'tit verre! Vite!" So said that officer to him, and he hastened away to obtain the brandy. But Charles had pulled himself together by the time he returned with it, and was concocting an explanation of his volcanic demeanour, interspersed with gratitude for the interest his military friend had been so prompt with. As the latter was quite ready to accept any explanation, whether he understood it or not, there were advantages of a sort in Charles's being almost unintelligible to him. Probably "misunderstanding" was the only word of which he took in the meaning. But he was very proud of his English speech, and the way he understood the language. He was a good-natured sort of fellow.

Charles made Jules the garçon a present of the cognac, and collected his scattered faculties as best he could. He saw dimly that the best course open to him would be to swallow his break-

fast, however much it choked him. But first he must make sure that he could not overtake her at the Gare du Nord. For he was convinced at once that she had left him to return to England. Where else could she possibly go?

He went to the Bureau to learn the times of the trains, not feeling equal to an interpretation of a Continental Bradshaw, but first enquired—though not hopefully—about his wife's departure. The presiding Goddess at the Bureau was very unsympathetic, but testified that the lady had certainly appeared shortly after seven o'clock, having descendue her très peu de baggage, un petit coli comme ça, de ses propres mains. She had desired a flacre, but her instructions as to her destination had not been overheard—or rather, there were almost as many testimonies as terminuses in Paris, no two alike. Then, asked Charles, what time was the tidal train for Calais? Eight o'clock apparently. That was it, clearly. She had made for the earliest departure for London.

The next train was many hours later—well on in the afternoon. There was nothing for it but to saunter about Paris, chafing, counting the fruitless minutes as they passed, wondering at the innumerable advertisements of bitters and laxatives that covered in every spare wall and hoarding. Why did so many young ladies of startling—very startling—beauty take such an interest in the removal of their compatriots' obstructions? He got through a good deal of time going up the river to Vincennes in one crowded boat, and down the river to Auteuil in another. He cared for nothing but getting through the time, and he got through a long morning. Then he returned to lunch at the hotel, to pay his bill and finish his packing. After that there was only an hour to get through before starting for the Nord. He would feel himself again when he was fairly on his way to London. Till then, he had to bear the delay, and he bore it.

The weight on his soul grew less as he approached the station; still less as he booked his luggage, and hers which she had left behind; but it was not until the train really began to move, and the clanks of dissevered rails at intersections were approaching from the engine and dying away, each after its climax, towards a last guard's van, Heaven knows how far off, that he felt his identity to the full, and settled down to an evening paper. Only ten hours now at most, including his journey to Wimbledon! Or—stop a minute!—why Wimbledon? Because, a thousand to one she had gone to her mother's! Of course he would find her there. A young woman who leaves her husband in a

fit of pique naturally goes home. Her love for her mother may have been lukewarm, in a daughter, but she *was* her daughter, for all that. And no one has more than one mother. Yes—she would be in Devonshire Place, sure enough! Say, twenty minutes from Charing Cross. He would leave his luggage at the Customs, and go on, straight.

He had quite made up his mind what his attitude should be. Peccavi—culpa mea!—that was to be the upshot of his pleading. He had done his part as the champion of Truthfulness—had spoiled her holiday and driven her away over the dark Channel alone. Well—at any rate she must have had a beautiful passage; that was one comfort! This wind, that was keen to flatten out the osier beds in the drained marshlands out yonder, only rose after we left Paris. A northwester of this sort might mean a two-hours passage, turbines or no!

Calais pier and the usual pretences on the part of the staggering throng that has to get across the gangway and secure a sofa in the cabin, or failing that, a chair in a sheltered corner. A throng that encourages itself with a delusion that this wind is endemic—always *does* blow at the mouth of this harbour. It will be a lot better, your informant can testify from past experience, when we get fairly out to sea. Has he not known Calais harbour from early boyhood?

Then disillusionment, and general surrender to despair! The turbines that were going to drive the ship arrow-straight ahead, through billows mast high if obtainable, seem determined to disappoint their backers. Stewards—the converse of those at public dinners—rush about with armloads of empty vessels and sixpennyworths of brandy. The stewardess has too much to do, and can't do it. But this will rather increase her salary, so she is resigned. Then your ticket, please; and we shall be in in ten minutes now. Are we very late? Well, we ought to be in by now—that's about all it comes to!

Then a hush, and a sudden alacrity to be among the first to scramble up the gangway. Then the train—in Charles's case the first cargo dispatched—and an English evening paper to bring him up to date. Then, gliding through darkness with a preposterous feeling of surprise that everything here is so intensely the same as when he left it less than a week ago.

What did he care how near midnight he rang up the immaculate butler at Devonshire Place? Or indeed his august mother-in-law herself? Lucy was there, and he wanted to eat that humble pie and get it over. All would be well, and they would

enjoy the holiday yet that he had been looking forward to. What was it, after all, but a double journey for both of them? And by good luck she had escaped the dusting he had just had, on the Channel boat. For an amphibious person on the pier had said to him, in response to an enquiry:—"You should have been a bit smarter and caught the morning boat, if you wanted a smooth run. Just your sort of water it was. Likewise, if you wanted a bad passage, you might have had that, in an hour or so. Because it's just as like as not to turn stormy." Charles shuddered to think what this person's sort of water was.

A little scheme ran in his head how he and Lucy, friends again after reconciliation—better friends than before, for that matter—would celebrate the occasion by a little *dîner-de-noces*, like the people in that play. Only last night—oh, think of it! That scheme made a halt in Oxford Circus, due to a traffic block unexplained, quite endurable, and did not end because the cabman turned round and went through Hanover Square. But it lapsed under exasperation at the length of Wimpole Street; an unchangeable affliction which mere measurement does not lighten the burden of, in spite of the nature of Magnitude.

But it ended, and here we were at last! He did not dismiss his cab; for, though she was sure to be here—where else could she be?—he was not going to intrude on his mother-in-law's hospitality. He would go on to the diggings and astonish Mrs. Gam when she came in the morning.

He decided that a generous, outspoken knock would herald him best—would forecast the import of his mission to Lucy. He could hear sounds within of a deliberate butler coming up from the kitchen; and in his footsteps, each one of which was grudged as unnecessary, that butler's conviction that he was a Mistake. Why the devil could not that old fool be a little quicker? Even if he was ever so much convinced that that knock had come to the wrong door, he would have to open it in the end.

No shooting back of bolts or unslotting of chains on the other side of that door! Someone was coming home late, with or without a latchkey. It could only be Mrs. Hinchliffe herself. Ten to one he would find his wife alone, because she could scarcely have accompanied her mother, who never went out except to dinner, and could not bring an uninvited guest. So much the better!

The demeanour of Mr. Peterfield was dictated by what was due to his position on the one hand, and by unqualified aston-

ishment on the other. The two dictations clashed, as no well-constituted butler ever shows surprise—it is a human weakness. Had he given way to his, Charles's expectation of finding his wife at her mother's would have been cut short on the doorstep. As it was, the mere fact that Mr. Peterfield's reply to his enquiry:—"When did Mrs. Snaith come? What o'clock, I mean?" was caught by a gasp, did nothing to shake his deeply rooted certainty that the young lady had arrived, and was in the house. It had still such hold over him that he could repeat:—"What o'clock? When did she come?" with scarcely a trace of misgiving in his own voice.

Mr. Peterfield overcame the gasp, and spoke. "I ask your pardon, Sir," said he, "but did I understand you to say Mrs. . . . Mrs. . . . ?"

"Mrs. Snaith, I said. Who the devil *should* I say but Mrs. Snaith?" Charles shouted impatiently, but his voice fell to say:—"Do you mean that she isn't here? Where is her mother . . . ? When do you expect her in? Mrs. Hinchliffe—your mistress, I mean. Where is *she*?" For Charles had inferred from surroundings that his mother-in-law was dining out. The butler looked at his watch. Mrs. Hinchliffe might come any minute,—was late, in fact. "Then where is Mrs. Snaith? When did she come?" Charles repeated the question with a voice again raised.

"Would you excuse me just one moment, Sir?" The butler, confronted with so trenchant a tone of doubt on a point of what was to him certainty, got away to the kitchen stairtop, and sought confirmation from the cook. He came back from a colloquy fortified, and prepared to deny Mrs. Charles Snaith, at all hazards. "I would not have spoke positive, myself, Sir. But Mrs. Branch is not likely to be mistook. Mrs. Snaith has not been here, and we certainly was under the impression she was in Paris, Mrs. Branch and myself."

"She *must* have been here, I tell you," Charles almost shouted. It seemed too incredible that she should never have been to the house, although possible that she had gone home afterwards. Mr. Peterfield looked like a butler who knew it would be bad form to contradict his betters, and was correctly silent. Mrs. Branch, an old lady whose resources in clean frills and aprons seemed inexhaustible, testified from the top of the kitchen stairs, as one who really had no claims to be heard above the basement. "I think you will find Thomas is right, Sir. It would have been mentioned to me if Miss Lucy had been here." For Mrs.

Branch ignored on principle that that young lady had changed her name. It was an assertion of her footing in the family.

Charles did not quarrel with this. He even accepted her conservatism, repeating the name after her without inverted commas. "Miss Lucy left me in Paris this morning to come to London. She ought to be here. I thought I should find her here." He passed into the house for nearer speech. "Are you absolutely certain she has never been?" To which Mrs. Branch, always looking beyond him for sanction and confirmation from the butler, as a higher authority, replied:—"There could no one come to the house without Mr. Peterfield knowing, or me."

Charles was discouraged, and bewildered. The idea had possession of him that his wife never would run away from him to go back to their own home, and had left his imagination no resource but to picture her at her mother's. Not finding her there, how could he think of her otherwise than as at The Cedars?—there was no other possible place. And apart from the difficulty of following her now—for a cab all the way was the only chance now, at near midnight—a hundred irreconcilables started up full-armed to be dealt with. The only idea that crossed his mind was that possibly—only was not this too good to be true?—that inexplicable callousness towards their son and heir had suddenly vanished, mysteriously expelled by the excitement of her resentment against his father.

A very slight chance of a very big boon is a palliative. Panic must hold her hand as long as one can caress the idea that all this seeming disaster is a blessing in disguise. Charles was reassured too by the butler's calmness.

He settled down to a proffered *Times* sheet, with an option of a *Graphic* in reserve. But he was only affecting an interest in their contents, not to fall short of Mr. Peterfield's philosophic calm. He would take nothing after his journey—he was sure of that, in spite of Mr. Peterfield's confidence that he could offer him anything—everything. He sent the cabman's fare out, deciding that he would walk to the diggings—could get another cab anyhow if his valise was too heavy to carry. He only caught six words, or perhaps seven, of the chat between the cabby and the butler—not a dispute about the fare, for it was like Cæsar's wife—but probably about the general situation. For the six words were:—"I could have told him that," and the doubtful seventh was *Cl-cck!* It is a word?

Mr. Peterfield returned with news of his mistress. He was pretty sure that was our carriage just come into the street. His

confidence in the length of Wimpole Street allowed him to bring this fact upstairs without misgiving about getting back in time for the knock, which was *de rigueur*. It would not have been at all correct for him to wait and watch, like Mrs. Bluebeard for her brothers.

"Oh—Charles! . . . What's this nonsense about Lucy? She's in Paris." This excellent lady was disposed to be intolerant towards actual facts, when they ran counter to her predetermination of them.

"She's nothing of the sort," said Charles. "She's in London, somewhere. Unless"—dropping his voice—"something's happened."

Mrs. Hinchliffe was taken aback. Or possibly her breath had been affected by the stairs. She fell back in an armchair.

"What silliness!" said she. "As if anything *could* have happened!"

Charles felt it would be as well to get his tale told. He passed by what amounted to a claim that Mrs. Hinchliffe's belongings were immune from human mischances, and continued:—"Lucy came away from Paris this morning . . . without consulting me . . ."

"Without consulting you? What does that mean?"

"And ought to have arrived in London . . . Well—by six o'clock at the latest. I expected to find her here."

"And why did you expect to find her here?"

"Because nothing would be ready for her at home. But she must have gone there, I suppose."

Mrs. Hinchliffe's most active quality was torpor—if it is a quality, and can ever be an active one—and her whole soul would rise to resist any inroad upon it. Now, a son-in-law who rushed into her house at midnight expecting to find his wife there was clearly an inroad on her torpor. She caught at his supposition that his wife must be at home in order that his departure thither should be as prompt as possible. "I suppose she *has* gone there," said she. And shot in a yawn with five fingers and several diamonds in a way that added:—"Hadn't you better follow her?"

Charles recognised the force of the yawn by saying:—"And I suppose I had better go too"—and rose to do so. He had expected a more sympathetic interest, and was disappointed. However, he was getting to know this mother-in-law of his. He could soften the position—make its angles less abrupt, so to speak—by looking at his watch, and did so. "Gracious bless us!" said

he. "I had no idea it was so late." And held out his hand, good-night-wards. "I'll send you a card," said he, imputing an interest in her daughter to this lady; indeed, he felt her stoniness rather an embarrassment.

"Oh yes—do by all means!" said the stony one. "But no doubt she's all right."

Charles was going—going—but not gone, when a slight stirring in the dry bones of her apathy made Mrs. Hinchliffe say:—"I suppose I'm not to be told anything?" The suggestion that she was being kept out in the cold was unwarrantable. But Charles forgave it. He was too glad to get anyone to talk to about the situation, on any terms, to be drawing fine distinctions.

He decided, after a moment's reflection, on:—"You see—the fact is—we had had a misunderstanding."

"A misunderstanding!" Mrs. Hinchliffe's sudden look at him as she repeated his words said plainly:—"Oh ho!—this is interesting. Tell more!"

He resumed the chair he had left, and started on a complete explanation, from the beginning, of Lucy's rash disclosure of the particulars of Dr. Carteret's disappearance, and of her subsequent silence—that was how he put it—about the newspaper-man to whom she had disclosed them. He was humbly apologetic for his own part in the matter, ascribing to himself a most reprehensible impatience and hastiness of temper. This may have been partly due to the fact that, as things stood, it was impossible to be sure that something had not happened. How often one notes a growing leniency towards the failings of a person who may be in pieces, or—as Mr. Mantalini said—a demd damp unpleasant body! We earn the good opinion of our fellow-creatures by Death, especially when it makes short work of us, and we have had the misfortune to be caught napping by Azrael.

He did not observe—his preoccupation perhaps made him unobservant—that his mother-in-law's aroused interest seemed to die down mysteriously in the course of his narrative. It seemed to subside as he disclosed the bone of contention between her daughter and himself. A mere *suppressio veri*; scarcely a fib, certainly not a lie! Ridiculous to fall out over a thing like that. He had a sense that his tale had somehow fallen flat—not that his hearer had been expecting something juicy and was disappointed. Far from it!—in fact, he credited her maternal solicitude with a sense of relief, which she may, or may not, have experienced.

"Is that all?" said she, when he had finished. "Just a fit of petulance. Well—we must hope you'll find her more reasonable when you get to Wimbledon. Dear me!—as if I didn't know Lucy."

Unless a man loves his mother-in-law—and Charles's love for his was a very chilly one—he resents a superior maternal tone towards his wife. He was not yet prepared to join chorus in a patronising criticism of her weak points, while he would have welcomed any censure of his own impatience gratefully. So he looked at his watch again; a pure formality, as he knew. Time had continued since he consulted it last, fifteen minutes ago. And then he said good-night, and meant it, so far as it was simply a finality. As a wish for a fellow-creature's slumbers, it was lukewarm. For he thought Mrs. Hinchliffe should have shown more concern about her daughter's non-appearance.

He was not really seriously frightened about her himself, being convinced he should find her all safe at The Cedars to-morrow. But he felt bewildered at his transitions from place to place, and at the odd turn events had taken, as he walked by short cuts, known only to the confirmed Londoner, through intricate Soho, by Lincoln's Inn to the Temple. Trymer's, that believed him afar in foreign cities, ignored him on that account still more forcibly than it had done in his absence in broad daylight. Its gloomy silence in that small hour of the morning oppressed him, as he paused to think how he saw the last of Fred, waving farewell to him opposite the College of Surgeons. What malice of Fortune had possessed her that she should spirit him away just at the time when he was most wanted? For who could have calmed the troubled waters of his life—and Lucy's; it was to be the same life—like Fred? However, he could write him a long letter, begging him to write to Lucy; telling the whole story without reserve; relying on him to pooh-pooh the offence of the newspaper paragraph. He went a long way in forecasting the words Fred would employ in speaking of it to Lucy—how that he was sorry to hear that Charley had been making an ass of himself about that premature announcement of his uncle's disappearance. As if it mattered one straw when the thing came to be known of! She was to tell Charley to shut up, and keep his legal views to himself till they were called for. Continuous self-blame, as the source and origin of the whole business, would be his until he was assured, from her lips or pen, that every ripple the affair had raised on the calm waters of their married lives had disappeared. This imaginary letter of Fred's went on

to announce his return in a few days, he having already outstayed his most liberal estimate of a holiday. But he did not expect to find them in London—hoped they would be climbing Dolomites, or otherwise touristically employed.

He arrived at the diggings, and mounted its familiar prison-stair, haunted by a painful consciousness of the dissimilarities of Paris and London. His little den was in apple-pie order, and he felt accordingly grateful to Mrs. Gam. But sheets on the bed were not to be expected by a home-comer who was not expected himself. No one lies down in blankets until he is so sleep rife that he cannot lie awake in them. A rhinoceros might do so cheerfully, not an ordinary thin-skinned human creature. Charley sat down to write to his friend without a guess that every word he wrote would have its sting.

Where did Fred suppose he was as he wrote?—so ran his letter. Postmarks and date apart, would he have guessed? However, the date as he had written it above was written by an honest Injun, and official stamps would be as illegible as usual on the envelope to-morrow. Then reasons why, showing that Injun in a most unfavourable light. He had behaved odiously to Lucy in Paris, found fault with her, lectured her, nagged at her. And what for, did Fred suppose? Nothing in the world but that old story of the paragraph—Fred would remember all about it—in the newspaper two years ago! It seemed that he had failed to impress his *fiancée* at the time with the confidential character of his communication, and an impudent Irish editor had wormed it out of her under solemn promises of secrecy. Charley exaggerated grossly in favour of the culprit at this point. In fact, his whole story—for he gave full details—took Lucy's part against himself.

Well—said his letter—what was the consequence? His attitude of blame towards his wife could only have one result—that of causing her intense annoyance, more particularly as—so he suspected—she was probably quite unconscious of any blameworthiness in her conduct from the beginning. But she need not—and this was his only serious indictment against her—she need not have acted so hastily as she did. He then filled in particulars of her flight—as he took for granted—to England, and brought his narrative up to the moment of writing. His letter reflected more credit on the chivalry of the writer than it did on his truthfulness.

It ended:—"I shall go straight from here to The Cedars to-morrow, and shall make the best amends I can for my unhus-

bandly conduct. Now I want you, dear old boy, to do me a good turn. There is no sense or reason in her making herself uncomfortable about that newspaper business. *The thing was my fault from the beginning.* So just you write her a long letter, wiggling me up hill and down dale, and acquitting her without a stain on her character. 'Twig?'

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CHAPTER XXXII

He went to bed as soon as he felt sure of sleep, and was not disappointed. He woke next morning early, and remembered that he had forgotten that he should want breakfast. Never mind! There was a place at the corner of Smith Street which would be open early and he could get a cup of coffee there. Could he? He had forgotten that he was not in Paris, but in London.

A woebegone waiter, who was providing an even more woebegone customer, who looked as if he had passed the night in the streets, with a pennyworth of milk and a slice of yesterday's bread, heard Charles's application for breakfast, and seemed to doubt his hearing. "Did you say coffee?" said he. Yes—that had been Charles's very expression. "You'll have to wait," said the woebegone waiter. Charles thought so too, to judge by appearances; and went to the buffet at Waterloo; where, having compounded for coffee by accepting chocolate, he got away to Wimbledon, and finally by cab to The Cedars. His reflections by the way on the differences between London and Paris were uncomplimentary to the former.

Well—here he was at last! Now he should find Lucy, and make it all up. And of course!—there was all her luggage at Charing Cross. Nothing to be done but disinter it at the Customs, and they could be off again, to catch the midday boat. After all he was not sure he was not glad this had happened. Better this way than that they should have gone on, with a buried misunderstanding. Rather a heavy price to pay, though!

It was Tom the gardener who came to the gate. It was a settled policy with Tom to show no surprise at anything. Charles found it convenient to forget that he had an imperturbable gardener, and put this *parti-pris* down to Tom's having been forewarned by his mistress's coming the night before.

"Didn't expect to see us again so soon, Tom, eh?" was accepted by Tom as a sufficient reason for not enquiring after that lady. Any satisfactory reason for silence, on any subject, was welcome to him; and Charles's speech could only mean that his wife had stopped somewhere on the way—at her mother's, for instance. *Per contra*, Tom's demeanour went to prove that she

had already arrived, preparing him for his master's advent, later.

On which account Charles felt mightily at ease as he walked up to the house, accompanied by Tom bearing his valise. For it is an established law that though we may have carried our own bag from Greenland's icy mountains, or across Ararat, it shall be snatched from us at the dawn of a domestic—ours or any man's else—who will unpack it in a bedroom forthwith if we don't keep a tight hand on the key. Tom would not have done so, but Anne would, who met them at the door. He would have surrendered it in silence, and fallen back on his wheelbarrow straightway, but that the blank astonishment of Anne's face provoked him to say:—"It's the master." Had he been loquacious, he might have added:—"Not a spectre, though you seem to think so!"

Charles's thoughts were inside the house already, where he saw Lucy, in anticipation; so he could not stop to analyse the expression of a mere *soubrette*. He walked in and began picking up unforwarded letters. Something of importance might have been overlooked. He was perfectly convinced, at that moment, that the next would bring him Lucy.

"Would you wish, Sir . . . ?"

"Eh—what? Stop a minute! . . . Would I wish what?"

"Would you wish . . . Would you wish . . ." Anne was trying to discover some indirect way of obtaining a light on the inexplicable. She ended up:—"Would you wish your room got ready?"

"Would I wish my room got ready?" Charles left the question for an answer as soon as he had wondered enough why advertising dentists poured out their hearts so much for his benefit. Then he picked it up. "My room got ready? Of course I wish my room got ready. Why shouldn't I?" He looked up, to see what he could make of this handmaiden, and only saw that she seemed at a loss. But why? "Is your mistress in her room?" then said Charles.

Anne faltered out:—"The mistress . . . the mistress . . . is not here, Sir!" And her voice was fraught with possibilities of panic, kept in check by domestic obligation.

"But she is here—she *must* be here. Tom!—Tom!" He called the gardener, who still remained within reach. "Didn't you say you had seen Mrs. Snaith? . . . Yes, just now!"

For Tom, taken aback, had wavered. His reply of course was an explanation, clear enough. He had merely taken Mrs. Snaith for granted, as a probable sequel.

"Who is here, then? Is Mrs. Gorhambury here? Who is that going upstairs?" Mrs. Gorhambury was laid up with lumbago. That was the young lady. What young lady? Why—Mrs. Gorhambury's young lady, Miss Fraser. She had stopped on from yesterday. Charles very nearly said:—"Elbows, I suppose"—but stopped in time, and said instead:—"Ask her to come and speak to me." He thought that the sooner he went to headquarters for information, the better.

Anne left him chafing, and went upstairs. Charles was at no loss to see what had happened. Mrs. Gorhambury had one of her lumbago attacks; probably had written to Paris to say so, only of course they couldn't have had the letter. Elbows had come on her bike, as an intermittent visitor; and, finding the nurse helpless—one knows what lumbago can do when it tries—and the baby practically dependent on a nursemaid whom its father called Tilly Slowboy, had volunteered a rescue, and wired to her own family not to expect her till they saw her. It was all very obvious, and really that girl was an awfully good-natured girl.

She would come directly; so Anne reported. Afterwards, in telling her sister the tale of Charles's unexpected home-coming, she averred that she had all but said aloud:—"What, Nosey back again!" but had got the whiphand of her tongue in time. However, when she made her appearance a moment later, she seemed to have merged her first surprise at his appearance in that caused by his coming alone. For her words were:—"But what have you done with your wife?"

Charles rather welcomed the opportunity for accounting for Lucy's absence aloud. The sound of his own voice gave him courage to believe her all safe, only delayed by some accident. "To tell you the truth," said he, concealing his uneasiness ostentatiously, "I rather expected to find her here, as she started before I did. But it was rather fortunate as it turned out, because she's a bad sailor. They told me on the boat that in the morning the sea had been like glass. Has it been stormy here?"

Nancy didn't want to talk about the weather. She wanted particulars of Lucy's independent journey from Paris. How, why, when, and where had she and her husband parted company? Charles caught her grave and curious look fixed on him, and knew what it meant. But it seemed to him that his ease of mind would be best shown by an *entr'acte* about the lumbago patient. "Sorry to hear this about Mrs. Gorhambury," said he.

"I know she has these attacks. She's seen the doctor, I suppose?"

"Oh no! No, she won't see doctors—says if Nantucket Oil of Green Myrtles doesn't cure her, nothing will. . . . When did she start?—Mrs. Snaith, I mean."

"From Paris yesterday morning—tidal train about eight o'clock. If she isn't here soon, I shall . . . I shall begin to wonder," he made a poor show of a laugh over this, and his hands were restless, a sure sign of uneasiness. He continued, somewhat as though the matter might be discussed seriously, without prejudice to the impossibility of "anything" having happened:—"Of course I should be very uneasy if I didn't know she might have stopped the night at Dover . . . Yes—that was it, no doubt! There's a Mrs. Scroope or Scrope, who was a friend of Lucy's at school—lives near Dover; Canterbury, I think. Nothing more likely than that she would be driving over to Dover—seeing someone off by boat as like as not—and just caught Lucy on the pier. If she did she would never have allowed her to come on to London. One of the Fotheringay Smith girls she was—know 'em?"

"Me—no! But if Mrs. Snaith had gone to Canterbury, surely she would have written to say so?"

"Much more likely that she should have written and the letter miscarried, than that anything . . . should have happened. For one thing, if it had, we should have heard of it before this." His attention was caught again by the serious look in Nancy's eyes—serious enough this time to make him say:—"What is it you are afraid of?" The rôle of reassurance did him good, reacted on him. When you are apprehensive of evil, nothing does you more good than to encourage your fellow-creatures.

The reply was:—"Oh, nothing—nothing! *She'll* take care of herself all right. Not go near the edge of the platform and so on. . . . Now let me tell you about Mrs. Gorhambury and why I'm here."

"Yes, I want to hear that. . . . Baby's all right, I suppose?"

"O Lord yes!—I should rather think he was. . . . Don't go up to see him for a minute or two. When he's ready to receive, they'll come and tell us."

"Who will? . . . Oh, Tilly Slowboy, of course! Now tell me about Mrs. Gorhambury." He settled down to listen, as a hint towards an armchair opposite for the young lady. She liked the window-seat, farther off, and would be very comfort-

able there, thank-you! The grouping seemed somehow better form to her. It was not because her frank face looked better against the light, catching its stray locks, nimbus-wise, that she did it; but from a superstition about the fitness of things, not easy to describe. She could tell Nosey about the nurse's collapse there, just as well as in that big chair, like a visitor.

It seemed that Mrs. Gorhambury had been perfectly well till the day before, when Nancy, who was a frequent worshipper at the shrine of her admirer, Charles the Third, noticed that she appeared to move stiffly; and, in reply to enquiries, was told that it was only a slight touch of lumbago, and would go. It had not gone, but had got worse, showing a very *intransigent* spirit, Nancy, perceiving that this meant a Regency of Tilly Slowboy, and alive to her limited capacities, had done precisely what Charles anticipated, and established herself as Charles the Third's guardian *pro tempore*.

"And what does that young man think of the turn-out?" said Charles.

"Baby?—oh, he sanctions it, but treats it as a joke contrived for his amusement. I think ■■ he grows older he'll be keenly alive to the humorous side of things. I took him in just now to pay a visit to poor Mrs. Gorhambury, who I assure you simply can't move, and he didn't show a particle of sympathy—merely split with laughter."

"His withers are unwrung," said Charles, not affected by this tale of his son's selfishness. Nancy, not catching the drift of the remark, looked unresponsive; whereupon he said:—"Let the galled jade wince, don't you know!" A quotation which she may have recognised or not; it did not appear which. For she exclaimed:—"There's the post. Shall I go?" and went. Charles's nerves were all on the strain to know if a letter had come from Lucy. His masculine dignity must be maintained, and he made a parade of deliberation in following her.

He met her coming from the doorway, reading the envelopes of a very perceptible postal delivery. Stupid, irritating girl!—why could she not give them to him? He would see the handwriting, at once. But an appeal to hasten matters would have looked as if he was anxious. And he wasn't—mark that!—he *wasn't*. "Fetch them in here," said he, to prove it. "Fetch them in here and look at them on the table." He was doing his duty by masculine dignity, and really doing it very well.

Three minutes later, he was examining the unopened letters again all through, and Nancy was saying:—"No—There's noth-

ing!" She was convinced. But he said:—"Stop a minute! Don't let's be in too great a hurry;" and went slowly through them, looking at back and front. Then he gave it up. No—there was no letter.

He walked uneasily, fitfully, about the room; and she said not a word. Pray Heaven that an uncanny thought that had crossed her mind was wrong! That would be too horrible.

He had stopped opposite the window, with his back to her, looking aimlessly out on Tom at work, and the lawn. Now he turned round suddenly, and said:—"No—I don't think anything of that. Why *should* she write, unless she meant to stop on at Mrs. Scroope or Scroope's? It only means that she will turn up presently. And a nice blowing up we shall get for being in such a stew about her! . . . Come along and let's have a look at Master Charles." He spoke as one who brushes away a perplexity to make room for a pleasant thought. She too was glad of a diversion, for that wandering idea that had come into her head had made her quite uncomfortable.

A story may be at a loss to account for the thoughts and actions of its characters, and its safest line may be to simply *tell* them, and leave its reader to analyse and understand them as best he may. But some stories have a certain fussiness of their own, that will be always probing for motives and impulses, for the sources of ideas that seem to spring from nowhere, and the blindness to others—gross as mountains, open, palpable,—in eyes most deeply concerned to see them. This story, for instance, would fain know why at this particular moment this girl Nancy Fraser should suddenly—for the first time, mind you!—become alive to the danger of a reciprocal passion, fraught with tragic consequences, between this good honest Nosey's wife and his friend. That was the idea that flashed into her head and made her life for the moment a misery, inflicting on her a burden she hated—secret thought. For a politic concealment of any kind was a thorn in the flesh to her; or a thorn in the mind—a mental thorn. And she could not petition Nosey for the wherewithal to quash this thought.

What a let-off it would be if Lucy drove up to the door, and her voice were heard again in the house as it was only a month since! How welcome would be the sound of mutual reproaches, each one's blame for the other's share of some stupid misunderstanding! That was the English of it, and as for what the misunderstanding was, enquiry into that would be simply ridiculous. Besides, it was no concern of hers. If her married friends had

tiffs, the more candid they were about them the better for her. Not that she was in any present want of a beacon to head her off the shoals of matrimony. So long as the opposite sex had the good sense to steer clear of her, she could handle her own helm unassisted.

But Lucy had not come back, yet!

So a look at Master Charles would be an alleviation, both to his father and herself. "Stop half a minute while I run upstairs and see that his Majesty is fit to receive," said she. Charles was left an easy prey to his own thoughts for a metaphorical half-minute which may not have been over six times as long as a clock half-minute. He could not keep them at bay, and was truly glad to be told that now he might come up, please!

Master Charles *was* an alleviation. He was evidently prepared to receive a visitor, or even cavalry, if the latter were small and soft. For he all but got his father's head in chancery in the very first round; indeed, he did, only a certain vagueness of purpose got the better of him, and made him release it, throwing it away with an apparent anticipation that it would go through space, pointblank. Then he attached himself to a button with the fixity of a limpet, and made awkward attempts to get it into his mouth. His attitude towards that newfound oddity, the Universe, seemed to be identical with that of the boa-constrictor towards a blanket; who would like it all, please, but wants a corner to begin upon.

A voice which was evidently that of a nurse on her back, behind a door which was on the jar, or only just off it, wanted to assert itself, but was handicapped by local causes. "I'll see what Mrs. Gorhambury wants," said Nancy. "I'll risk leaving him with you. Back in a minute!"

Tilly Slowboy stood by, in case of emergency, like a ship near one that doubts if it will founder—can't be quite sure—and Nancy interviewed Mrs. Gorhambury, and came back.

"Wants to know when Mrs. Snaith is expected," said she.

"What did you say to her?" said Charles, holding his off-spring at arm's length, who seemed to enjoy his inability to claw his father by the hair or eyelid, established by the fact that it was his father's arm's length, not his own.

"I said in an hour or so." Nancy thought it her duty to inspire confidence. Her pretext of it was very fair, considering.

"In the course of the afternoon, anyhow!" His pretext was very poor. Then, apparently at right angles to the line of argument, he said abruptly:—"When do you have lunch?"

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"Not till one, I suppose. Do you want it sooner?"

"Oh no!—rather the other way. She will scarcely be here by one." Then he saw it would be as well to open further margins, as one cuts the leaves of a book; to have plenty of alternatives, ahead, in case the next page of experience should leave her coming in suspense. "I'm not sure," he continued, "that it wouldn't be safest, on the whole, to keep the two lunches apart. If she arrives just before lunch, of course cook can bottle up a little till she's ready. But if she comes in in the middle, she'll get it cold and messy."

Nancy saw how he was hedging against disappointment. "It isn't cook," said she. "It's Anne. Cook's not back yet from her holiday. But Anne can manage, perfectly well." Charles was rather impressed by this young woman's mastery of household details. She went on:—"They fed me up here yesterday. I stopped them laying the table for me, all by myself. Of course to-day it's different."

Said Charles, speaking through his son's fist, which was partly down his throat:—"We needn't be ferociously punctual. Call it half-past one. I've a sort of impression she'll be here about half-past one." He was really feeling a kind of collateral gratitude for this third place at table, not only because it seemed to give substance and reality to the prospect of his wife's return, but because he wasn't quite sure what was the correct attitude for him about a *tête-à-tête* luncheon with a young lady. It had not occurred to the young lady to give the matter a thought.

Her whole soul was fretting under that calm exterior, at that hideous dream—Nancy went through the form of denouncing it mentally as such—of this man's wife having deserted him for his friend. Was it a wonder that his restless anxiety about her, visible through his courageous mock-confidence in her timely reappearance, should intensify her pity for him when the blow fell? Her perception of the fact was no mere guess—rather, it was the result of a number of imperceptions, no one alone of which had power to open her eyes to the truth, but which had suddenly combined to make it manifest. The legend of the mother's worldliness which had brought about the marriage, dismissed when she first heard it as obvious nonsense, came back now as a powerful auxiliary to a suspicion, whose every recurrence was more vivid than the last, that her friend Mrs. Snaith's own affection for her lawful husband had not stood the test of a knowledge of his friend's passion for her. She certainly had known that Lucy was no stranger to Fred's infatuation about

her, but then it was a long step, to her mind, from knowing that a fool of a man was besotted about you, to readiness to do despite and wrong to an affectionate husband, in order to satisfy his lawlessness. In fact, she had been so convinced of Lucy's indifference to Fred—except in the sense of compassion for this infatuation, as a sort of disease—that she would have felt it an insult to her friend to breathe a suggestion to the contrary. But now that a number of half-forgotten trifles came back to her memory, in a seeming conspiracy to put the most sinister construction on this outcome of the couple's holiday in Paris, she felt fairly racked to know more of its real causes. Mr. Snaith had said absolutely nothing to account for their premature return.

And he withdrew to his little smoking-room—to write letters, he alleged—without saying anything. Master Charles endeavoured to detain him, but was overcome by numbers. When half-past one came, or rather twenty minutes to two, and yet no arrival of the mistress, the scratch cook, embarrassed, sent up to know what to do. Was she to send up lunch, or have it spoiled? Nancy, thus referred to, said the former, and the gong was sounded. For in a well-regulated household, even though there be but one to be summoned to the table, and he is already in evidence, any trained parlour-maiden will as it were break loose like a mad drummer until the wonder is that anyone within a mile stops away.

"Bless us and save us!" said Charles, coming from his letter-writing, which may or may not have been genuine. "You don't mean to say it's half-past one already! . . . All right!—I'll be down in a minute." When he did so he was clearly beginning to show distress. For he considered it incumbent on him to reassure Nancy. "You mustn't think anything of her not coming yet," he said. "My experience is that people who are waited for never come. Like the watched pot that never boils. You'll see, that we shall either get a letter by this next post, or she'll come in and blow us all up sky high for expecting her sooner. That's what people do." He gave Nancy a selected cutlet carefully, and then himself a chance one in a hurry, which he seemed to think could take care of itself for awhile, for he leaned back in his chair and went on talking. "Haven't you noticed how unfeeling one is about folks that have been expecting one every minute for hours? You see, one has such firsthand information about one's own safety. It doesn't the least matter how good one's heart is, etcetera; one always behaves like

a beast to one's anxious family. . . . I suppose yours understands about you, and won't fret?"

Nancy treated her family as if it and she were Lacedæmonians. "If they do it's their own lookout," she said. "I told them not to expect me till they saw me. They're used to me, by now." She took mashed potato, but laid down her knife and fork. "I won't eat my lunch unless you eat yours, Mr. Snaith. That's flat!"

"That's a contradiction in terms," said Charles. "Oh yes—I'm going to devour my lunch. Why shouldn't I?" He also took potato, and picked up his knife and fork.

She ignored his question, but said:—"What's a 'contradiction in terms'? Explain!"

"Why—taking potatoes and saying you won't eat your lunch, in the same breath!"

"Well—I certainly shan't! So now you know. . . . Take some mushroom catsup, in the square bottle, and pass it over to me. . . . Yes—that's it."

"Oh yes!—that's what I was looking for." But this was a lie, and only a transparent apology for the speaker's pause. However, he stood committed now to that cutlet, anxiety or no.

Lunch passed, and they talked. And Nancy hung out baits or invitations to him to throw some light on the story of his abrupt return home, which she felt they were conspiring to take for granted. And still, he changed the conversation whenever it neared explanation point. And still the object of their anxiety did not come—did not come!

A postman's knock an hour after brought Charles out in haste from his den, to which he had retired. Nancy, from the nursery, was scarcely later. "Say there's a letter!" said she. But he said, with a pretence of cool non-disappointment that she found painful to hear:—"I'm afraid I—*can't*, this time." He returned slowly to his citadel, reading a letter of slight importance from some casual of none. She climbed up, equally slowly, to the nursery. She found the contemplation of Master Charles, in a sleep just distinguishable from waxwork by recollections of his bottle, discernible only by experienced eyes, a great resource and consolation. On the other hand, the enquiries of the lumbago-patient from afar were perplexing. Why couldn't Mrs. Gorhambury have a little tact, and help to accept the situation as the true and perfect image of what one expects, nowadays, instead of asking whenever a ring or a cart wheel was audible from below:—"Is that the mistress?" and saying on receipt of

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a negative:—"There now, I made sure it was her!"? But it never was!

Nancy was not surprised at Mr. Snaith's silence about the reasons why he and his wife had parted company to come to London. Nor is the story, when it bears in mind how very slight had been her intercommunion with him, measured against her comparative intimacy with Lucy. She would, in fact, have felt some astonishment if he had considered himself bound to explain the situation. After all, she was to him, as he was to her, little more than a name. And neither name, when used in confidence to intimate friends, was such as to convey to an uninformed bystander an idea of respect or reverence, or even affection; which may subsist, after a fashion, without either. Any other story may say what it likes, but this one will continue to hold that the names of "Elbows" and "Nosey," which either had chosen for the other, could never have suggested themselves except as—suppose we say?—semi-discompliments, more akin to indifference than contempt. Such names as one chooses at random, for mere discrimination of individuals, are apt to refer rather to defects than to beauties of appearance. Charles had felt more than once that "Elbows" had been premature, since so marked an attachment had sprung up between the young lady and his eldest son, and had wished it could be reconsidered. But to her he continued "Nosey" pure and simple, as the feature that had suggested the name remained in evidence. Until she had a *tête-à-tête* luncheon with him, a couple of hours since, he really had been, for her, the merest walking gentleman on the stage of life, who had married her beautiful friend, but was always away when she called, and didn't count.

Surely many a lady who reads this may recall some such intimacy with a friend, who had a thing called a husband, a sort of tame cat or rabbit, a mascot attached to the house, who only came in for a minute and said how did she do; and wanted to know where the paper-knife was, or the hammer, and had better ask Jane. Charles's identity, so far, had run on those lines, for Nancy Fraser.

So she took his incommunicativeness as a matter of course, and would have been rather embarrassed than otherwise if he had plunged into an explanation. This did not the least interfere with a growing curiosity as to what that explanation might be. It grew continually, fostered by a hope that an *éclaircissement* might dissipate that ugly suspicion, that would come back

and back, clouding her mind against her will, constantly fought against and rejected on its supposed merits, in vain.

Why should this suspicion thrust aside anxiety about Lucy's safety as a traveller—ordinary safety? Somehow or other, misgivings about security of sea and land carriage found very little place in Nancy's mind. For one thing, news about accident to life and limb on frequented routes travels quick—could only have been delayed in this case by difficulty of identification, a most unlikely thing. For an her, Nancy's own experience had taught her that even a fairly comely woman traveller may rely on a sort of universal ægis of protection from railway guards, captains of Channel steamers, and so forth. How intensely secure good looks—real beauty—must make one on a journey!

It was this thought that made Nancy say to Charles, later that afternoon:—"You need not be the least afraid that anything had *happened* to her," with a stress to show the kind of happening referred to. This was in Master Charles's nursery, where his father had been invited—by him, it was alleged ungroundedly—to take afternoon tea. His own tea went on all day, more or less, and had no real tea in it, only milk.

"Oh no—of course not—of course not!" Charles brushed the idea aside. "We should have had news of anything of that sort long ago." He was impatient of hysterical fancies. But he volunteered no substitute for them—made no new conjecture to account for this long delay. He drank his tea in silence, and watched his son's method of dealing with offerings from his admirers.

"He does take hold of anything that's small enough for his hands," Nancy explained. "But of course a balloon like this is ridiculous. You see, he bangs it away. The worst of it is, that he shows temper if it isn't offered to him again immediately. I assure you he flies quite into a violent passion sometimes, when he doesn't get everything exactly to his liking."

"Take the balloon away and let's see," said his father, rashly.

"It's sinful to tantalize the darling," said Nancy. "But just this once, to show what a spirited precious he is!" A creditable effort of Master Charles to embrace the balloon, with a view to ultimately swallowing it, missed fire, and supplied an opportunity for putting it out of sight. He appeared for a moment dazed and bewildered, as though he found its disappearance difficult of belief; then burst into lamentations, at the same time becoming crumpled with rage and despair. Nancy did not venture on contention; it would have been useless. She

even had the disingenuousness to suggest that malignants, whom she spoke of as "they," were at the bottom of the balloon's disappearance and that she herself was a benevolent agency that had frustrated their nefarious operations. "Did they, then?" she asked. "Did naughty wicked people come and carry away his balloon?" But he wouldn't give it up to any such marauding tribes, especially if he could get his arms round it. That at least was Nancy's conviction, as she calmed the troubled waters. A heavenly peace irradiated Master Charles's countenance, in a tenth of a second or perhaps less. A baby's sudden transition from infuriation to benignity is one of the most consolatory events in Nature.

"I think I had better stop on to dinner here," said Charles the father, taking a second cup of tea, "in case she arrives in time. She's much more likely to be late, wherever she's stopped by the way." This fiction of a halt *en route* had found a good deal of favour. It was plausible enough as a working theory; one to sustain hope on. He continued, rather as one who formulates a programme than announces a complete one:—"I shall go back to town to-night, to sleep at my chambers, if she doesn't turn up."

"Most likely she will," said Nancy. She only said it because she thought he deserved a little help and encouragement.

"I sent a card to Mrs. Gam to have the place ready, in case I came."

"Just as well to be on the safe side!" said Nancy, meaninglessly. There was no earthly need, that she could see, for him to go away to his chambers, whether his wife arrived or not. Mere restlessness!

And he seemed to think that explanation was called for. For he said:—"You see, the chances are that if I go there to-night I shall find a letter that wants an answer. Some correspondence seems to have been going astray." This was vague and unsatisfactory, so he continued—inventing as he went, Nancy thought. "If she doesn't come to-night I shall only have lost a post, for nothing. And if she does—come after I'm gone—not very likely!—you'll send me a wire, won't you?"

"Of course. First thing in the morning!"

"Just so. And then I can come back here at once, to talk over arrangements. The chances are she'll vote for going straight out to the Tyrol, without stopping at all. She takes rather kindly to travelling."

All this of course was manufactured, as Nancy saw—full of

weak points. But Charles had a reason for sleeping at the diggings, which he could not well speak about to her. If he decided to remain the night at The Cedars, might not Nancy herself decide on blowing up her tyres and speeding back to her own home? What need for her to mount guard over Master Charles with his father in the house, were his nurse's lumbago ever so bad? Moreover, a sub-murmur in his mind kept on hinting that the young woman might have ideas . . . ideas about the position, don't you see? . . . connected with the gentleman's wife not being there, don't you know. That sort of thing. Some young women were particular.

Charles had written letters during his retirement in the morning, and one was to his august mother-in-law, that she might have the opportunity of sharing his anxiety about her daughter if she was so disposed. "Not that she cares a damn!" said he as he fastened the envelope. This letter reached her as she awaited a tea-visitor in the afternoon. As soon as she had satisfied herself about her figured silk's skirt-disposition in her armchair, she opened her letters and condemned one or two, as uninteresting, to a later inspection; then came to her son-in-law's. His was less so, but she could not find a distance at which it was easily legible, without her double eyeglass. So she fished out the latter from somewhere under her chin, and held out her nose for it.

"Don't get up because of me, dear!" said her visitor, coming in unheralded. Mrs. Bannister Stair scarcely needed a precursor. "Letters, I see!"

Mrs. Hinchliffe's attention seemed riveted, for the moment. The other lady waited patiently, for that moment, and for one or two more. Then the letter-reader turned the last page smartly, and read it too quickly. Then she said deprecatingly:—"Half a minute, dear!" and went back a page. Then:—"Yes. Rather odd, too!" and dismissed her preoccupation to kiss her friend effusively, who threw out suggestions in favour of enlightenment. Whereupon Mrs. Hinchliffe declared that it really *was* nothing. This declaration she weakened, however, by saying a second time:—"Rather odd, too!"

"A mystery!" said Mrs. Bannister Stair. But she could wait.

"No—no mystery! Only that absurd girl of mine . . . Yes—tea, Unwin, and if anyone else comes, I'm not at home. . . . That absurd girl of mine"—Mrs. Stair waited, exem-

plarily—"came away from Paris by herself and hasn't been heard of since!"

"Well, but—that's very odd!"

"Just what I was saying, dear! Very odd. That husband of hers"—the lady spoke as if her daughter had married a regiment and this was a subaltern—"turned up last night to look for her here, and of course didn't find her. Now he's gone down to Wimbledon and she isn't there either. Here's his letter!" She didn't give it up, but read:—"Got here an hour since, but no sign of Lucy—so far. I don't think we need be the least uneasy. For one thing she may have stopped by the way—nothing more likely—she has friends not so very far from Dover—parties named Scroope or Scrope—she knew the she-one at school at Canterbury, I think. I shall probably get a letter in an hour's time, to say. I'm sending this off to catch the post. If she comes to you to-day, as may happen, make her wire. I know I'm fidgety—it's the nature of the animal!" Yes, he's a dreadful fidget." She dropped the letter on her expensive silk, and resigned herself to reminiscence:—"I don't believe Lucy had any friends at Canterbury—Can't think who he can mean! Scroope or Scrope—Scroope, or Scrope! Let's see—didn't Emily Fotheringay Smith marry a Scroope or Scrope, and go to New Zealand?"

"Of course she did. And he's mixed Canterbury in New Zealand with Canterbury-Cathedral Canterbury, in England. That accounts for it. Canterbury Lamb, don't you know?"

"Oh dear yes—Canterbury Lamb of course! How people do mix things up!"

"But what can have kept Mrs. Snaith?" Mrs. Stair was interested. Apart from personal acquaintance, any beautiful young married lady was an object of interest. The disappearance of a dowdy single one would not have roused her curiosity half so much. She would not have given a second thought to a really plain sample over thirty. "Nothing can have happened to her?" This with rather a subdued manner.

"Oh dear no! I'm not the least uneasy about her." The suggestion made the speaker quite short and irritable. "She's not a chicken." The word "chicken" was a good one to snap with, and Mrs. Hinchliffe used it for that purpose. But she softened down to say:—"What do you suppose could have happened?"

"Simply nothing whatever. Dear me!—as if I didn't know what travelling alone was. W. v.—I went to Calcutta all by my-

self when I was eighteen, and never was more protected in my life. One is, on boats and in trains. And I hadn't a tenth part of your Lucy's looks."

"Exactly my way of looking at it. Anyhow, I am *not* going to get in a fuss because Lucy and her husband choose to have a tiff and come home separately. I've no doubt he was in the wrong, with that nose."

Mrs. Stair's look said, "Aha!" But only for a fraction of a second. Her well-restrained remark was:—"Dear me!—those two. Fancy their quarrelling! I never should have suspected it."

"I don't mean seriously *quarrelling*, Adela. How silly you are! I said *tiff*."

"Well—tiff! Tiff enough to make them part company, and travel separately."

"I tell you I don't think anything of that. Some say the less married people see of one another the better. They see too much of each other, in my opinion, at The Cedars."

"My dear Zoe, you give me courage to say something."

"Well—say it!"

"That Mr. Snaith has it in him—mind, I am ready to give him the credit of every possible virtue—but he has it in him to become a bore."

"My daughter has not complained of him. What makes you think so?"

Mrs. Stair was settling down for a chat in the opposite arm-chair. In time she was ready to pick up the thread of the conversation. "What makes me think so?" said she. "Well—perhaps I don't exactly know, myself."

"*Something* must have put the idea into your head."

"Ye-es—*something*! But ought I to say? However, we really are such very old friends . . ."

"Please don't have a nonsensical fit, Adela, but say what you've got to say."

"It isn't much from any knowledge I myself have of your son-in-law. You know how little I know him personally. Really the idea is founded entirely on what I noticed that Sunday. I'm almost sorry I mentioned it."

"Oh—don't tell me if you don't like."

But that was not what Mrs. Stair wanted. None of that, please! She jerked the topic back into its groove. "The idea, Zoe dear,—with you!" Then she went on quickly, to block any other form of refusal to hear:—"It was suggested to me entirely

by the animated pleasure Lucy seemed to me to find in the society of . . . in short, of other gentlemen."

"What other gentlemen? I knew you were going to say something of that sort, Adela."

But Adela was shocked at her dear Zoe's suggestion that what she had said was of any sort whatever. If it came into any category at all, it was one that was distinguished by the lamblike innocence of everything it described. As to imputing anything to dearest Lucy, nothing could have been further from her intentions. Was it likely?

Mrs. Hinchliffe seemed to think that on the whole perhaps it was. "Who was the other gentleman?" said she, doggedly.

"I may as well be candid. . . ."

"Better, I think!"

"Well—there *was* no one there except old What's-his-name and the scribbler, and *they* don't count. And the man I mean—the handsome young man, of course."

"Why, of course? Mr. Carteret is my son-in-law's oldest and most intimate friend. And the idea of a flirtation; . . ."

"My dear Zoe! I never used the word 'flirtation; . . .'"

"No—but you meant it." As the lady had meant it, or had meant to mean it a little later, her voucher, which she now made, that nothing could have been further from her intentions, had not the full force which it might have had.

Now, the curious part of this colloquy was, that it did *not* lead to strained relations. On the contrary, the fact that it seemed to land its subject within reach of candid discussion, seemed to be a source of satisfaction to both parties. Once launched on an interchange of ideas not so embarrassingly pure that even flirtation was not to be spoken of, the transition was easy to a daring consideration of the eventualities of a dull husband, a beautiful wife, and a susceptible friend. But the points raised could only be ventilated under a continual reservation, that nothing therein could possibly apply to any blood relations—not of the speakers but—of the persons spoken to. For Mrs. Hinchliffe had not the same need, presumably, of such reservations on her own behalf, and was not the maker of them.

Thus it was that Mrs. Stair, longing for information of Fred Carteret's whereabouts, and suspecting that he was in Paris, felt bound to give absolution, *anticipamente* as the Italians say, to Mrs. Snaith for happening to be there at the same time. She got it done somehow, however; and not only that, but managed an enquiry about Fred in so unconcerned a way that her friend,

whatever she supposed to be its motive, was able to reply:—
“*He’s* somewhere abroad, I believe, but not in Paris,” casually
enough to dissociate him from her daughter in that capital.

Whether Mrs. Stair accepted her words does not appear, but
she appeared to breathe freer, rather offensively, on hearing that
Fred, though perhaps abroad, was not known to be in Paris.

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CHAPTER XXXIII

DINNER time had nearly come at The Cedars. But there was no sign of its mistress. What was Nancy Fraser to say to that poor man, its master, who had gone for a long walk when he came back and she had to report his wife's non-arrival?

What a godsend it would be—just think of it!—if she were to arrive *now*, just before his return!

No letter had come by the postal delivery just after he started on his walk. She had examined the envelopes, but there was no handwriting bearing the faintest resemblance to Lucy's. A diseased optimism made her say to herself that this was rather good than bad. If she was on her way—arriving in an hour or so—a letter arriving no sooner than this would have been a superfluous. She never would have written such a letter. Therefore, she would probably arrive in an hour or so. Clearly. It was a handy sophism to live upon, during that hour or so. But *now*, the fact was staring her in the face, that the time had lapsed, and Lucy had *not* come.

Still, the sophism might last through dinner, and eat Nosey must. Nancy could not have him on her hands starving himself from anxiety. That was the way her inner consciousness put it, although she was aware she was the merest accident in the house.

So, when she heard Charles's key in the front door, followed by his step in the passage, she ran downstairs from the nursery, leaving Tilly Slowboy to convince Master Charles that he ought to go to sleep, and found his father hunting in those letters for the handwriting he longed to see. "Nothing has come," said she, with an equanimity too marked to be of any value. "But I don't think that implies anything. Why should she have written when she's coming herself?" And Charles said:—"That's what it is, no doubt. . . . I shan't be long. I had no idea it was so late."

He had stuck to his colours manfully through dinner. That is to say, he had held on, with the courage of despair, to the transparent pretext that all was normal—that nothing unusual was happening or would happen. He had eaten, or seemed to eat; and she, who was also somewhat of a pretender, had accepted

this seeming as a reality. Very little was said to show how either was on the watch for an arrival—an arrival and an explanation. They had so far recognised the facts that had to be faced as to have decided silently, by mutual agreement, that it was better to talk of something else. And they had talked of something else.

Charles, as soon as a rather scratch meal was dying away in a very scratch dessert, had made boldly for fresh fields and pastures new. "Let me see!" said he, "your sister married Professor Saxon, didn't she?"

"Not Saxon—Lomax. He's a Public Analyst, if you're any the wiser for that."

"Not sure that I am, much! I did know a chap though once who did that sort of thing, only he got the sack."

"What for?"

"For analysing wrong. Or for getting detected, I don't know which." Charles told the tale of this misadventure in full. His friend had "detected" twenty-eight per cent of soluble lead in a potter's glaze-tub, and the potter swore that he and his ancestors had brewed that glaze for two hundred years and knew perfectly what it was made of, and that the analyst was an impostor. By agreement the decision on the point was referred to a great German chemist—who, being German, was sure to be right. But he, being naturally inclined to side with any official, anywhere, proceeded to "detect" thirty-three per cent of soluble lead in that glaze. It was a case of *trop de zèle*—that was all!

"I believe," said Charles in conclusion, "that my poor friend got the sack for not "detecting" more while he was about it. What does Professor Lomax analyse?"

Nancy, who had only half followed this tale—which indeed travelled outside her record—replied:—"Anything that comes handy, I believe; suicides' insides—anything of that sort. He detects arsenic in large or small quantities. They live at Brixton and I see them every Sunday. He's not a bad chap."

The scratch dessert had remained unappreciated by its proposed consumers, and Charles was by this time dallying with his pipe, with a view to permission to smoke then and there. He left the Professor a moment to say:—"May I smoke?" and having received Nancy's reply, that she could go away if she didn't like it, returned to him with a divided attention—divided between him and ignition. "I say, Miss Fraser," said he, being fairly alight, "speaking of Professor Jackson—Saxon—no, beg your pardon!—Lomax . . ."

"Speaking of him, what?"

"Well—he put it into my head to ask you. But perhaps I oughtn't?"

Nancy considered. "Depends so very much on what it is," said she. "But whatever it is, if you didn't mean to ask it, you shouldn't have mentioned it. Ask away!" She was not quite free from misgiving that this question might be unwelcome.

Charles also considered. His consideration ended with a nod of general assent, and then he went straight to the point. "What made your sister chuck Fred Carteret? If you know!"

Nancy flushed visibly—was evidently uncomfortable. Her misgiving was justified. "I know," she said, "perfectly well. Cit told me. But she didn't mean me to tell you or anybody." If she had stopped there he would have enquired no further. But she must needs add, with a superfluous candour:—"Especially you." To think anything, and not speak it, was to her an artificial effort.

Had a thought of her meaning been possible to him, he would have been at once on the track of it. But the consciousness of any kind of complicity in the miscarriage of Fred's love-affair was so remote, that he was merely puzzled; indeed, was inclined to think he had misheard her words somehow. He merely said, apologetically:—"Of course I have no right to ask," and withdrew from his enquiry, checking curiosity about the meaning of the last two words. His nearest guess connected it with his intimacy with Fred, which this girl must know all about—no doubt of that! If Fred was held to blame in her family, was it likely she would advertise their indictment to his brother?

He forgot the whole thing a moment later. For just as Nancy, anxious to avoid further catechism, rose saying that perhaps she had better see that Mrs. Gorhambury was going on all right, the post was audible on the garden-pathway, followed by convulsions in the letter-box. Oh, if that were only a letter—at last!

Charles was no longer keeping up the farce of disguising his anxiety. He sprang up and was out of the room in an instant. The postman's knock came after his exit. She did not go upstairs, but waited, hoping with very little hope. For that grisly idea that had tormented her before was with her still, cropping up at unexpected moments, connecting itself undefinedly, but more and more persistently, with this seeming disappearance of Lucy. If only she could muster the courage to make Nosey tell her why he and his wife left Paris separately!

There was no letter, and Charles's blank look was painful to see. She could find no foundation for a spurious hope; so she said nothing. What could she have said, that would not have resembled cheering him up, and giving him courage and so forth—about the most depressing attitude possible under circumstances calling for fortitude? Who does not break down, or burst into tears, under consolation?

She went upstairs, and he turned to go into the little smoking-room, without a word. He felt the germs of panic about his wife's safety growing in his mind, and knew he had to keep cool. Well, then—accepting that obligation, what was the next step to be?

The time-honoured course in all such cases—go to the police? Was that the only resource? See how utterly at a loss they were when Fred's uncle, old Carteret—poor old Stultifex Maximus—vanished so strangely two years ago. Besides, he shrank from catechism about recent events. His imagination created a speech Manton would most likely make. "You'll excuse me, Mr. Snaith, but we are obliged to ask these questions. Had there been what we call *words* between you?" Could he say no? . . . Tush!—what rubbish!—to allow mere diseased terrors to get possession of him like that!

A tap came at the door. Oh—Miss Fraser—yes, come in! Nothing the matter? Baby all right? Oh dear yes!—baby was all right. But Nancy had something to say, something fraught with an earnestness that could for the moment supersede even baby.

"I've come down to see what you intend to do, Mr. Snaith?" Then as if to add:—"I know that is a question you cannot answer offhand," she took a seat.

It was an opportunity not to be lost for Charles to show that he was not the least alarmed. "You mean," said he, "what I should do if I were at all alarmed about Lucy? But I'm not."

"All right!" she said. "Put it that way if you like it better. What would you do?"

"If I were—if I were—" said he, intensifying his hypothesis, "I suppose I should . . . I suppose I should take steps."

"I suppose so too. What steps?"

Perhaps a pretence that he need not shrink from a supposititious case was the most effective way of showing fortitude.

"Why—in *that* case—in *that* case, mind you!—I should consult the people at Scotland Yard. . . ."

"This isn't a police case."

"No. But they have exceptional and most effectual means of enquiry. Nothing like it anywhere in Europe! Even the French and Russian police may take a lesson from our people at Scotland Yard. I saw a good deal of them at the time of that unfortunate affair of poor Fred's uncle—our old school-master, you know. . . ."

"I know—Dr. Carteret. But they found nothing."

"Well—no! But I am convinced that if there had been anything that could have been found they would have found it . . ." He stopped abruptly and broke into an uneasy laugh. "But what has all this to do with Lucy's being a bit behind time in coming home from Paris? Why—God bless my soul!—isn't it a thousand times more likely that she has stopped on the way, and written that she won't be home for a week, than that anything should have happened to her! I mean, suppose the letter miscarried. They *do* miscarry, every day. I don't care what the post office says. . . . What?"

She had begun to speak, and stopped. She began again, speaking in a curious, significant way:—"I do not suppose for a moment that anything *has* happened to her—anything of *that* sort. . . ." She was getting into difficulties. She halted and changed colour.

He changed colour too, but *his* change was towards pallor. "Then what . . . what *do* you suppose?" He hesitated.

Instead of replying to his question, she looked straight at him, and said:—"Mr. Snaith, I want you to make me a promise. Promise me that you will not go to the police without telling me."

He began confidently enough, saying:—"That's an easy promise to make, seeing that I shan't . . ." But something crossed his mind before he could say what he meant—that Scotland Yard was foreign to this subject. He stopped uneasily, and ended:—"I wish you would tell me *why*. You've got some idea."

Nancy stood biting her lip, in sore perplexity. How she longed to be able to speak out! But the "idea" she had got was simply too terrible to utter aloud—to Charles, at least. To say that this was so, and yet to keep silence, would be worse than plain speech. But could she not speak plainly, without bringing in Fred Carteret? It was he that was the terror of that idea. Keep him out! A fortunate recollection of her mother's family came to her and made speech easier. "I may just as well tell you," said she. "It was an aunt of my mother's . . ."

THE OLD MADHOUSE

Charles looked puzzled, and repeated:—"An aunt of your mother's! Ye-es—what of her?"

"She bolted from her husband—went to the Orkneys, I believe, all by herself. She wrote to him—some weeks after, I think—and then he went to the Orkneys, and brought her back. She was very good friends with him, all the time."

"How rum! Did she say anything in her letter? Anything in the way of explanation?"

"Said she wanted a change, I believe."

"She must have been cracked."

"Not at all. The doctors said it was a form of mental alienation. What's to prevent Lucy having an attack of mental alienation?"

"Your great-aunt couldn't expect a monopoly, certainly."

"I'm so glad to hear you laughing at me. But one can't help being uneasy."

"Yes, one can. If 'one' means me. I'm not, the least. Mental alienation may go and hang itself. A letter has miscarried—and there's the whole mystery in three words. You'll see I'm right."

Nancy was on the edge of saying:—"I hope I shall." She stopped herself in time, and said she expected she would. The change of a word made the whole difference, and the phrase was good to make her exit on. She had been so near an awkward corner that she was glad to get away. So she said good-night, and was going, when Charles stopped her.

"I say, Miss Fraser!" said he.

"You say—what? . . . All right, I'm not in a hurry! Tilly Slowboy's mounting guard."

"Well—it's nothing, only I thought I should like to know. About your great-aunt and great-uncle. . . . That's right, isn't it?"

"Yes—great-aunt and great-uncle. My mother's aunt by marriage she was. Why?"

"I'm not sure that I have any right to be inquisitive?"

"It's not inquisitive. They've been dead twenty years. I only remember them as a child."

"What I wanted to ask was—are you sure there had been no quarrel? But if you were so small how could you know?"

"I knew nothing but what my mother told me, that Aunt Cæcilia ran away from Uncle Frank to the Orkney Islands and the doctors said it was mental alienation. He didn't find her through the police at all, but got a letter a month after, and just

went and persuaded her to come back. What has happened once may happen again. So you see now why I want you not to go to Scotland Yard enquiring. Where's the use of setting people talking?" According to Nancy's standard, this speech was a piece of duplicity, and she felt quite guilty. But, after all, her suspicions about Fred Carteret might be so much unqualified delusion. She had simply no right to speak of them. Remember that, for all she knew, Lucy was unshaken in her wifely constancy, and she only looked on Fred as the victim of an unfortunate delusion. With his mother it was otherwise; but, to her, Fred's indication of how the land lay had been just as much as was necessary—no more.

Charles seemed to find that great-aunt's eccentric conduct soothing. No—it would be quite premature to take for granted that any case was made out for a hue-and-cry after Lucy. He would not have been deterred from it by any fear of being thought over-nervous and fussy about her delayed arrival; it was simply that he saw no occasion for panic under the circumstances. Of course he was in a fuss; he admitted that. But his common sense told him that this fuss was unreasonable, and it was our duty to be guided in all things by reason and common sense. In a few days' time—probably hours—we should be laughing at all this groundless alarm.

"Just so!" said Miss Fraser. She had said good-night once, and was not going to say it again. But she was going back to Mrs. Gorhambury, who would be wondering what on earth had become of her. Charles felt that he did not want her to go. He was afraid of himself, left alone. He had a sort of feeling that he could not press a young lady to stop and keep him company. In old days he would have added the words "even Elbows" to his reflection to this effect. He did not do so now.

How terribly he missed Fred! Think of the comfort—the support—the consolation it would have been now, to see his face, to hear his voice.

He had not announced his own programme—had merely told Anne that he might stop; so his room was to be ready. He did not feel inclined to toss and tumble on a sleepless couch, perhaps all through the small hours. And all the while—now he thought of it—a letter might be lying at the diggings, waiting for him. Yes—that was the idea! Walk over to Wimbledon in this splendid moonlight and catch the last train up. If he came back here to-morrow he would probably find her letter; but she *might* have

written to his chambers. It was *possible*? Anyhow, no harm would be done.

The servants had gone to bed, and he had to unbolt the house-door to get out. No one would bolt it up again, that was certain, in case he changed his mind and went for a walk instead. But he wouldn't do that. Much better go up to London, and come back in the morning. He looked at his watch. Just time to catch the last train—no more! He started for Wimbledon at a brisk walk. However, there was really no hurry, as that train was always late.

A train that is always late is not to be trusted. If it comes to its knowledge that you or I want to catch it, it is as like as not to reform its bad habits, and be in time, this time, although it may have a relapse to-morrow. This vice especially distinguishes last trains to London. Charles's train left the station just as he entered it; and he, ascribing last-but-oneness to, *a priori*, had the humiliation of learning that there was nothing till seven-thirty to-morrow morning, and had to walk back. However, it was evident—and this was satisfactory—that there *must* be a letter at the diggings; otherwise, what motive could Fate have in thus reserving the natural order of things?

The most grievous anxiety will not force a man to lie awake who has covered nearly five miles of ground overnight. But it will fight a hard battle ere it gives way to Morpheus. Charles's yielded so late that he did not wake until Anne, who had drawn inferences from dusty boots outside his door, came with hot water.

He was late, and disconcerted to find that Nancy, in bicycle trim, was pumping up her tyres to depart. "I've committed myself to going," said she, "by sending them a wire at home to say I shall be home to lunch. And I've told Mrs. Gorham-bury to write for me if she wants me. She's a lot better, and I'm rushing away because I'm really overdue at home. They'll be making a rum! if I don't go. You'll see, you'll hear from Lucy to-day. . . . No, I won't go till the next post comes. Hadn't you better go and get some breakfast, Mr. Snaith? I'm going upstairs to say farewell to my beloved. Makes one feel like the Song of Solomon!" She felt her tyre, and saw that it was good, and went away upstairs.

Charley deceived himself into thinking that all was well with him, to the extent of swallowing an ordinary breakfast, and glancing at the usual news in a customary newspaper. He was braced up to this point by Miss Fraser's assurance and sangfroid

about the coming post. There she was outside, talking to King Solomon, who was being carried out by Tilly Slowboy to give her godspeed. She was speaking to him in a conventional tongue he was supposed to understand, to the effect that as soon as his delicious little legs were long enough, he should have a Humber all for himself and come for rides with his lady friends. Charles looked happy over this. It was as well that he should do so while he could.

Which of us has not felt that what the postman drops in the box cuts time in half, ending the Past on the hour when we had not read that letter; or beginning the Future, as may be? We have not read it yet, but its contents are there. When the unmistakable footstep was heard on the gravel path outside—for this postman knew how to open the outer gate, though no one else did, not even the Milk—Charles made his face stoical, not to show any emotion whatever before Tilly Slowboy, and the taker away of breakfast, or its memories. He communed with his son, leaving the undisguised eagerness of Nancy to get at the envelopes.

"Yes—here we are! This is her! Foreign postmark though—what's that for?"

Charles did not see the issue. "Well—that's all right!" said he. "Posted abroad. . . . Oh no!—I see what you mean. It is rum. But it's her handwriting, anyhow! Give us hold. Nothing like looking inside a letter to find what there is in it." For Nancy, clearer headed perhaps than he was—for indeed the sight of Lucy's handwriting had so relieved him that his judgment was, for the moment, nowhere—had seen that a Lucerne postmark brought no solution of the mystery; rather deepened it, in fact. "I'll just run my eye through it and tell you what's in it—honour bright!" Charles did not open the letter then and there—perhaps to assert Stoicism—but bore it away to his little smoking den, just round the corner.

Nancy would of course have waited anyhow, but outside this fact she was influenced by a misunderstanding of Master Charles's; if indeed she rightly ascribed an outbreak of savage violence on his part to a sense of injury at the letter being delivered to his father, and not to himself. Whatever the cause, he required a good deal of explanation and apology, accompanied by suggestions of his motives. As soon, however, as an intensely sudden calm came upon him, for no apparent reason, Nancy said to Tilly Slowboy, who was a lay-figure to converse with, but no more:—"I'm curious about that postmark—why Lucerne?"

Tilly conceived that this referred to the use of that name, when it would have been just as easy to call that place, wherever it was, by some plain intelligible English name.

"Well now," said Tilly, "if that very thing didn't crost my mind. Loose Hurn!—such a name I never, nor yet anyone else. As I say, there ain't no accountin' for foreigners, nor askin' of 'em what next. You won't be even with them. . . ." And so on. At another time, Nancy might have tried to correct the under-nurse's misconception. Just now, she was only anxious to hear the explanation contained in that letter. She would finish making sure of her bike's readiness for the road. It might be a long letter, and Nosey would read it all through before he came out to tell what was in it. No misgiving crossed her mind that anything was not all right. In fact, she went so far as to think to herself a wish that Nosey would look alive.

The nursemaid might communicate to Mrs. Gorhambury that a letter had come from the mistress. Nancy favoured a fiction that Master Charles was yearning to carry the news, and was rejoicing in the prospect of welcoming his mamma. He was borne away upstairs shouting and much pleased with himself, but neither confirming nor contradicting these statements.

It was a long letter—no doubt of that! Still, Lucy must have been all alive and kicking, to write such a long letter. That was satisfactory, at any rate.

Tom the taciturn appeared restless, irresolute, uncertain what he should garden next. For as he walked along the terrace-walk in front of the house towards where Nancy was engaged with her bicycle, he faltered and lingered—seemed to glance in at the window of the room where Charles was reading the letter. Not like Tom!—for one of Tom's aims in life was to limit all the others to the garden, and to ignore the house so far as was consistent with respect for its inhabitants.

Nancy set this action on Tom's part down to his ignorance—which she inferred—of his master's unexpected arrival. "Glad to see Mr. Snaith back, Tom?" said she, under this impression.

Tom corrected it, but with something odd in his manner. "I seen the master before," said he, "to talk to. Out in this here garden, early Thursday morning."

"Oh, I beg your pardon," said Nancy. "But you were very glad to see him then, no doubt? So it comes to the same thing."

"Ah, I was. Very glad to see him then, I was."

"Aren't you glad to see him now? You don't mean that!"

Nancy was amused at what she thought was merely the man's manner.

Instead of answering, he turned back along the walk, and stopped opposite the window, as before. In a second or so, he turned and came back, but seemed in a difficulty about speech.

"Well—what's that for?" said Nancy.

Tom stammered and turned red; then, with an effort, said:—"Wasn't I glad to see the master *now*, you said? Well, I'd be gladder to see him move, if you ask me. And that's the honest truth."

"Gladder to see him move!" Nancy repeated the words in sudden fear. "You mean that he's . . . ill? . . . What do you mean?"

Tom was ready with an indirect reply. "I should knock at his door," said he. "That's what *I* should do."

Nancy looked at him, and saw from his face what he meant. His look was explicit, though his words were not. "See that my machine doesn't fall down," said she, and forsook it.

She ran along the passage, stopped at the door of the smoking-room, and listened—No sound!—Then she tapped, once, twice. No answer! She wavered twenty seconds, still hoping an answer would come, then gently opened the door, ready to speak again if any sound came. She looked in and saw no one.

He *must* be there, of necessity. Tom had not seen an empty room through the window. His speech had settled that. It was the further window that he had paused at. Nancy saw the facts at a glance. She could account for the whole room, all but the floor between a sofa-back and the desk, easily visible from that window. What he had seen was there. And she, Nancy Fraser, had to see it first, and then call help. It was all clear to her in a moment.

She went near, in silent dread, and looked with an effort, at the insensible figure she had foreseen; then turned and ran back, calling for help as she went.

"Come!—come! Mr. Snaith is ill—he has fainted. Come! . . . Where is a doctor? . . . Where is his house? I can go for him. . . . Yes—quicker than any of you—on the bike." And being informed, Nancy would have started off there and then, to find him, if testimony had not gone to show that the same doctor would be sure to be out seeing patients; more by token that he was already due at The Cedars to succour Mrs. Gorhambury. It was a lucky chance, and he would be sure to arrive in a minute or two, as he had been in the neighbourhood.

His carriage had been seen to pass the house on the way to another patient, like it did yesterday, when he called on his way back.

An unexpected auxiliary appeared too in the shape of the doctor's patient. The shock and excitement drove the lumbago suddenly away from its victim, and the semi-dishevelled figure that met Nancy's surprised eyes on the stairs as—returning from her second visit to the insensible man, having found that neither she, nor the cook, nor the gardener, had any real knowledge of first aid in such a seizure—was actually Mrs. Gorhambury herself! Her experience was useful, as it saved Charles from sundry methods of treatment of which the other members of the household had heard tell as sovran remedies. She was reassuring about the case, saying after a very slight examination of it:—"No—don't you put his feet in boiling water, nor yet his head. Nor don't rub brandy on the palms of his hands. Just lie him flat on the sofa, and open out his collar, and bide a bit. He'll be come to before Dr. Tinkwell gets here—you see if he isn't!"

On her second visit to the room, after giving the alarm, Nancy had seen in Charles's hand the letter he had carried away to read. It was something in that letter that had done it. She longed to know what, to be relieved about Lucy's safety. But rules must be observed. "No man shall read another's letter without his leave" is a rule that scarcely admits of an exception. Nancy opened the table-drawer close at hand, and put the letter in and shut it. This was not to free herself from temptation, but to prevent its being seen—possibly read—by someone else.

Mrs. Gorhambury was right. The unconscious man recovered and spoke, or tried to speak, before the doctor arrived. Nancy could not catch what he said, and had to go away to head off the doctor from him, knowing that officious therapeutics would be unwelcome. She had also to explain Mrs. Gorhambury. Dr. Tinkwell was rather indignant at that patient's independent behaviour, he having told her on no account to try to get up. But he admitted the capricious character of lumbago. Nancy promised that she should appear forthwith and state her own case. She said almost nothing about the cause of the sudden alarm that had brought the nurse to her feet, and said good-bye to the doctor.

She met Mrs. Gorhambury leaving the smoking-room in an optimistic mood.

"The master's coming to all right," said she. "Just like I

told you! He's asking for some letter. We don't see no letter. Perhaps you know, Miss?"

That was all right. Miss Fraser knew what he meant. "You go and see Dr. Tinkwell, Mrs. Gorhambury," said she. "He's in the parlour." She went into the smoking-room.

They had got him to swallow brandy, in her absence. It had roused him, there was no doubt of that; was rousing him still, for that matter. "Miss Fraser knows," said he. "I had it in my hand—just now! What's become of it?"

"I know about the letter," said she. "I slipped it inside the desk. Here!" She went to the desk, adding, as she brought the letter out:—"Hadn't you better lie down, Mr. Snaith?"

He was raising himself with his hands, dropping his feet to the ground. Probably he felt his weakness and dizziness. For he fell back, saying:—"Perhaps I had," with evident relief. "They may go now," he said. But he seemed to think this might be felt as ingratitude, for he added:—"Thank you all very much. You were very kind. Now I am all right." The household departed, the housemaid Anne slightly asserting herself, as priestess of that floor, by removing something, or replacing something, or adjusting something she might just as well have left alone.

Nancy held out the letter for him to take. But he shook his head, saying:—"No—no—no! I cannot read it. I cannot trust myself. I must have read it wrong. I should read it wrong again. *You* must read it—aloud—*now!*" On the last words, he rose to emphasis; then seemed unable to say more, as though exhausted.

But it was something in this letter—some news or what not—that had brought on this attack. Nancy wavered, not uncompliant, but protesting. "Did Lucy expect me to?" said she, hesitating.

"Read—read!" said he, impatiently. "Never mind!—read it through, and get it over. . . . Oh my God!"

What could it be in the letter, to make him moan like that? All that Nancy could see at this moment was a letter written to all seeming with a steady hand, dated Hôtel d'Europe, Lucerne, two days since. She glanced quickly at the signature, and saw that it was from his wife, beyond a doubt. But why Lucerne? Her pause of bewilderment was brought to an end by his repetition of his request to her to read. "If I am gone mad, let me know it." More to himself than to her, he added:—"Perhaps this is all a dream."

She had no choice but to read, but the words were wormwood on her tongue. This was the letter:—

"After your accusation of falsehood against me last night no course is open to me but to end our connection. If I loved you, I might think otherwise. But I have come to understand how little affection had to do with our union. I was influenced—I am ashamed to confess it—by my mother and others, who represented to me that to reject your suit would be to throw away worldly advantages of which I might live to regret the loss. I was influenced too, very seriously, by the fact—which I freely admit now—that at the time I knew no man towards whom I felt more amiably disposed. Young women at my time of life often imagine that a feeling of this sort may warrant matrimony. I was mistaken, but a mistake is no crime, and once discovered, the sooner its consequences are undone the better.

"I do not blame your behaviour towards me last night. On the contrary I feel in a sense grateful for it. It has given me courage to speak plainly and end the unsatisfactory conditions of my life. Women would often take the same step, but they are cowards, and slaves of superstition. Their 'wifely duties'—forsooth!—are to be considered before their happiness. I am not prepared with this extent of docility.

"I am much concerned that you should not misunderstand me. You may easily put this action of mine down to resentment or dislike. If you ascribe either feeling to me you will do me an injustice. I have every feeling for you that is described as friendship, friendly regard, or respect. But one feeling I have not, and it is the one that is essential to every marriage in which the wife is more than a slave, I mean Love. *I do not love you*, and that is the simple truth in three words. That wife that we saw at the play in Paris obviously loved her husband in spite of herself.

"You will oblige me by informing my mother of this, and telling her that I do not propose to return to England, at least at present. Letters sent to me at this address will be forwarded. With every good wish for your happiness without me, I remain, your legally, at present, however impatiently,

"LUCY SNAITH."

Nancy had a hard task to read this letter. When she had finished it she did not dare, at first, to raise her eyes from it, and look up at the unhappy man on whom she had, as it were,

been compelled to use it as a knife. She had been stabbing Charles Snaith against her will.

A moment passed. Then she was forced to look up at him by the strangeness of the voice that said:—"What am I to do?" It was almost as though someone else, not known to be in the room, had spoken. His eyes were wild, and his breath came quick. He repeated again—kept on repeating:—"What am I to do—what am I to do?"

Nancy had her own convictions of what had happened—of what was going to happen. But her immediate task was to catch at anything that would bring him hope—anything to stave off the worst tension of the moment. An idea crossed her mind. "Listen!" said she, in a voice that meant that he should do so. "What was the name that doctor called it by? 'Mental alienation.' That's what it is with Lucy. She has *not* gone mad."

That eased him, with its clever assumption that nothing short of some form of insanity could account for such a letter. Nancy's speech simply dismissed as incredible any substantial change in Lucy's affection for her husband. Panic went out of his voice, and left it free to say:—"Yes—it's that! That's what it is—mental alienation—mental alienation! Nothing short of stark madness, else! . . . You really think that, Nancy Fraser, do you not?"

"Oh dear yes!—I'm entirely in earnest. I believe these things happen every day, if we only knew. Shall I tell you what I think you had better do?"

He thought a moment; then said very emphatically:—"Yes—I'll be guided by you. I can't see my way. This thing has turned me right over." Then he went on, but more as though speaking to himself than to her:—"What a brick of a girl you are! . . . Beg your pardon!" This last as though in apology for freedom of speech.

She took no notice of this, but went on, keeping to the point. "Write to Lucy, saying you have got this, and that you are starting for Lucerne at once; or—well!—as soon as possible. That is, lose no time!"

He caught at the idea eagerly. "Quite right—quite right," he said. "Much the best course. I'll go at once. I'll go to-day." He waited a moment for her to speak; then, misunderstanding a silence on her part, added hesitatingly, wistfully:—"It will be all right—all made up? You think so, don't you?"

Whatever she felt or feared, confidence was necessary. Put a good face on the matter, anyhow!—that was her feeling. "Think so!" said she. "I am sure of it. Shall I tell you what makes me so sure of it? . . . All right, I will." She explained that her reading of the letter had thrown a light on Lucy's disappearance, about the causes of which she had hitherto been quite in the dark. "To be sure," said she, "it did cross my mind when you asked whether my aunt Cæcilia and her husband had not quarrelled, but then I decided that you might mean that you and Lucy had not, which was all the difference. But her letter says, 'accusation of falsehood.'" She glanced at the first page in confirmation, then looked him straight in the face, her frankness scattering evasions in advance, with words he could not possibly contradict: "You and she were not in a honeypot, anyhow."

At another time he would have smiled at her way of putting it. Now he said, sadly and seriously:—"No, we were not,—not exactly. But nothing was further from my thoughts than to quarrel with Lucy." He really believed what he said.

"What a very funny thing it is," said Nancy, "how many people nothing is farther from everybody else's thoughts than to quarrel with! . . . Yes—I know that isn't big-wig lucidity, but you'll have to make it do."

"I'll make it do. It is a very funny thing, and I know quite well what you mean. But let me tell you the whole of it." He did so, after some protest from Nancy, who said it wasn't fair, because she always believed the side she heard first. However, she listened to a narrative of the facts, which was only misleading in the persistent attempt of the narrator to take the blame on himself. It was so transparent as to be intelligible to its hearer.

"I'm sorry for Lucy," said she, when he had done. "I'm afraid there's nothing to absolve her with, except that two years have passed since she told the editor chap. Plenty of time ago is as good as Holy Water." Charles interjected:—"Yes—I know. But it wasn't that." She replied:—"Of course not. She ought to have told the whole truth after you met the man at the play. Then she wouldn't have had a hocus-pocus about the letter. She got mixed up and couldn't get clear. Just like me when I tell lies!"

"Do you ever tell lies?"

"Precious seldom nowadays. I'm too stupid to get out of the messes I get into. Really if you heard me you would

think . . . Well!—it's a caution for snakes, I assure you." Somehow the gravity of Nancy's face, colliding with the schoolboy levity of her language, had the strange effect of making her look pretty; or, if that overstates it, of accentuating whatever beauty she possessed. For she had just enough to give her face an interest—must have had, for Charles to notice it at this moment.

He began one or two supplementary extenuations of Lucy's breach of faith in spite of the time that had elapsed, and made but a poor show. Nancy gave him very little help in this, though she did what she could. He was unable to conceal what was perhaps the worst feature of the case—that manipulation of the letter in Paris. Nancy's generous offer of her own reputation for veracity did very little good.

She was much embarrassed by the fact that she had sent that telegram home to say she was coming. As things had turned out, she would much rather have stopped and kept an eye on Nosey, with that terribly unsettled, haggard look upon him. Was he safe to leave alone? She would have no misgivings about him when he was fairly started on a journey, with Lucy at the end of it. That would be to-morrow. He would write for the evening post to-night, and would follow his letter in the morning. But how about the remainder of to-day? Well—he might go for a walk, as he did yesterday. He would be safe walking about as long as it was daylight. Or he might go up to town, to his place of business in Lincoln's Inn Fields, or to his chambers. But suppose he went to the latter, now the very essence of loneliness! Would he be safe there, in the dark by himself, with a razor?

She had an idea that would prevent that. The next time the conversation admitted it, she developed that idea. "I really ought to be getting on my way now," said she, "after saying they were to expect me at lunch. Papa's at home to-day, and he is a fidget and a half, I can tell you. You are just a born angel compared to him. . . ."

"A what?"

"A born angel. If one is five minutes late, he can't keep his hair on. . . . No—really I'm serious! . . . Well—you know Mrs. Gorhambury took up her bed and walked—as least, she *walked*. Anne told her some nonsense about you, and it gave her a start. I wouldn't trust her not to have a relapse. Miraculous cures do. Now, I should be much comfortabler if you would promise to stop here to-night, and not go up to town."

"Don't see why. But either way will do for me. Oh yes, I'll promise, since you wish it."

"I shall be much more easy in my mind about the King, if you do. Now I'm going up to have another touching farewell of his Majesty, and then off I go, and precious late I am!"

"I'll come and have a look at his Most Gracious, myself." So Charles followed Nancy up to the nursery. The monarch was in a most favourable mood, talking to himself in a language whose alphabet was very easy to say, as it consisted only of L and G. Twenty-six letters are needed to spell English, but then consider what a quantity of nonsense is talked in that language. Could it manage with fewer? Is there anywhere—in four-dimensional space, for instance—a tongue whose alphabet has a thousand letters? What a chance for the Press, if there is!

That such a current of thought as this should pass through Charles's mind—for of course that is where the story sees it—was nowise strange, if their observation is true who ascribe to moments of the gravest trial and tension a special bias to all that is odd and grotesque in thought, or merely trivial. To be dramatically correct, Charles's dominant image of his son and heir should have connected itself inseparably with that of his mother. Instead of that, it really seemed as though an impression of Nancy's was well founded, that the more he saw of the baby the less he would fret over her absence. The fact was that his son's powerful individuality was already asserting itself, though encumbered by the abundance of its incarnation. It may be that very few or none of the actions or motives attributed to him by his retinue were grounded on facts—such, for instance, as that he had been asking all the morning for his papa, to show him his new toof—but it was certain that when he was opposed in the minutest particular he showed a very bad temper indeed—roaring, Mrs. Gorhambury said, like a bull, and never giving over not till you let him have his way, if it was ever so. On such occasions it was difficult to dissociate the heavenly smile which illuminated his incipient countenance from some equivalent of gratification at success. This and similar phenomena had contributed to the formation of a belief in his father's mind that he really was a person on his own, however crude his character might be.

Therefore his lady friend Miss Fraser felt much better satisfied that Mr. Snaith should remain on at The Cedars during her absence—for she was meaning to ride over next day—than that he should go away, with this nightmare doubt about the future

upon him, to Heaven knows what degree of loneliness and consequent depression at his chambers. She really felt almost cheerful about him as they parted at the garden gate. Her last word to him was:—"Now, suppose you go away and write that letter to Lucy!" His reply was:—"All right. Plenty of time for that. I shall put off posting it till the last minute. I shouldn't the least wonder at another letter coming from her—and her coming after it. Ta-ta!" He watched the rider till she vanished with a loud stroke of the bell at a turning, and then went straight away to his writing-desk and began his letter.

Contrition. How could he blame himself enough for his impatience? It was all his fault and none of hers. He only asked to be forgiven and taken into favour again. He could not bring himself to believe—how was it possible that he should do so—that her letter was in earnest. He would not discuss it nor show it to her mother. It would be an injustice to her that he should do so. He would not, in fact, take it seriously. At this point in his own letter he felt an uncomfortable misgiving that he was overstating the degree to which he was able to shut his eyes, and drew out the letter to reread.

But then—consider what he had just written! He was not going to take it seriously. Then, why reread it? Why think about its contents at all, when to admit them to his mind was to treat as a possibility the idea that this wife whom he idolized—this woman for whom his love was as the core of his whole soul—did not love him, had never loved him? If that were to be true, what was left for him but death—death by his own hand? He looked that contingency in the face without emotion, without a shudder. It would simply be a sequel, far less terrible to him than its antecedent cause. Why, then, indulge for a moment the idea that such a letter could be in earnest? Suppose it real, how could he face life, after such an experience? He *could* face death.

That very nice girl who had just gone—by the way, what a jolly shame it was of him and Fred to speak of her always as "Elbows"!—*she* would tell him suicide was cowardice. He could see a mental image of that frank serious face, could mark the unfaltering decision of those lips that said it. But what would it matter, then, whether it was cowardice or courage? Nothing would matter! Oblivion is feelingless, and Death is Oblivion.

He wavered half a moment with that hateful, or merely

ludicrous, letter in his hand; then lit a Vesta match, the smoker's resource, never out of reach. Was he right? He could blow it out still? . . . No—he was quite right, and the letter was burning. He placed the cigar tray on a big red book that was lying on the desk, which he recognised as the Continental Bradshaw he and Lucy had managed to leave behind when they started. One always leaves something behind.

There! Half of the letter was cinder, and he felt happier already. Now three-fourths was gone, now four-fifths. And now nothing was left of it but what his fingers held—the fag-end he dropped in the cigar tray that they might not be burned. When the very very last combustible scrap was a sparkless ash, his breath came freer, and he turned to finish his own letter to Lucy.

He put dots to express this incendiarism, and continued:—“That means I have burned it. What less could I do, when every scrap of me is made up of denial of its possibility—is in revolt against every word it contains, and condemns its absurdity? Dearest, dearest love, if what you say were true—if I could dream that your love for me had never been other than lukewarm at the best, that would be the end of everything for me. I tell you I should kill myself. But I don't believe you—that's flat! This letter will go by the afternoon post and I shall follow it next day at the latest. I have thought it best, being here, to see Trymer in case he has anything to say to me. I might have seen him yesterday, but really I want a few hours to get settled in before talking business. Remember that for anything I knew something might have happened to you. In fact, I have been very anxious about you—that's the truth! I shall telegraph (I have just this moment seen the need for doing so) to say I am writing, and I shall come straight to your hotel confident of finding you. Till then good-bye!”

He did not mean to see Trymer, nor was it necessary. The merest put-off, that she might get a letter from him before his arrival! He did not analyse the whole of his motives, perhaps lest he should find that one of them was a fear that she might be in earnest after all. In that improbable contingency, surely it would be generous to help her to avoid a useless and painful interview. And prudence always makes allowance for *every* contingency, however improbable.

His letter finished, he was somewhat at a loss what to do; or, rather, what to pretend to do. For his head was too dizzy for any real employment. He went up to the nursery, to enjoy its

present lord and master, and further his views, if possible. But Master Charles was out in his pram, taking the air. Not the whole of the air—only as much as suited him. The capacity of his lungs had to be considered. So Charles began a letter to Fred, telling something, but not much, of his misunderstanding with Lucy; taking the tone that the course of true love never did run smooth, and Life, whatever The Optimist might say, could not be expected to be all beer and skittles. He was enabled to make short work of this part of his story by giving a full account of the fortnight they had spent in Normandy before going to Paris. Such a delicious time that had been! And to have it end in such a dismal fiasco as this! He was far from sure Fred would ever get this letter; as, if not already on his way back to England, he would be very shortly. In fact, it was rather a problem where to direct it, as he really did not know where Fred was. The hostess of the hotel Fred and his mother had just left in Paris, the day before his own arrival there with Lucy, had been told to forward letters to the Hotel Washington at Lugano. Should he, or should he not, direct to that hotel? For some reason unknown, it seemed to him an improbable hotel *per se*, not one that a matter-of-fact tourist would go to, to stop at. Much more like one that French *esprit*, which was visible in every fluctuation of that hostess's countenance, would invent rather than not answer an enquiry. Why Charles discredited this hotel is not known to the story; it was most likely only due to the state of his mind. But the fact remains, and also its immediate consequence. He took the cigar ash-pan off the Continental Bradshaw, and opened that work at a particular page, after an Index hunt.

Yes—he was right. Lugano and Lucerne were not a thousand miles apart—quite the reverse! This merely follows Charles's reflections; it does not justify the form they took. His impression of their distance had been due to the fact that they began with the same two letters. What could possess two lakes, so near one another, both to begin with Lu? If one of them had been in China now, it would not have mattered how much alike the names were.

But, being so near, an idea occurred to Charles. The way from Lucerne to Italy was through this very selfsame Lugano. So Bradshaw said. And Lucy had always harked back on some memories of a portion of her childhood passed in Florence, years ago. In fact, a vague ultimate trip to Florence had formed part of their recent programme—time permitting, of course. What

more likely than a bias in that direction on her part? It would account for Lucerne, at any rate.

He had written to the end of his paper to Fred, and was going to consign it to its envelope when this idea crossed his mind. It was worth a double postage to add a postscript, and he started it on a fresh sheet, as follows:

"P.S. Just got a notion! I didn't mention that the missus had deserted me and miffed off in an opposite direction. I didn't do this because I regarded the whole thing as unreal—a flash in the pan; but all my fault, mind you! I add this P.S. with a purpose. Lucy writes from Lucerne. I see from Bradshaw that Lugano is a very good stopping-place on the line to Florence and Rome. And if my surmise is right, she is making for Florence—and nothing is more likely than that she should come across you and your mother *en voyage*. If this happens, what seems to me most advisable will be for neither you nor your mother to show any surprise at her appearance, but wire at once to the last address I have sent you, to tell me where she is, and I will come immediately. I know you will be able to keep her till I can join you, and then perhaps we could all go on to Italy together. You can't be in any great hurry to come back. Do this for me, dear old boy, and whatever you do *don't blame Lucy*. The thing was absolutely my fault, as you will see when I give you the story in full, *viva voce*. Grant that her attitude on the subject is a little *freakish*, only don't condemn her until you have heard from my own lips how I have misbehaved. I must tell you that I have torn her letter up, as it seemed to me that it contained things she could not have meant.

"I have wired and written to her at Lucerne, telling her that I shall join her there to-morrow. If this reaches you there—*shouts*, you may conclude I am at the Hôtel d'Europe there—till further notice."

His mistrust of his powers of finding or fabricating excuses for what he called Lucy's *freakish* conduct kept him rather silent about details, all through this letter; and it did not satisfy him. But he could not think of anything better to say, and the idea of rewriting a letter to Fred quarrelled with his pen. So he ended by doing what so many of us have done under the same circumstances—enveloped it because he had written it, directed it because he had enveloped it, and stamped it because he had directed it. Then it *had* to go. A letter acquires a certain self-assertion when mellow. Nothing is then wanting but the postal

stamp, compared to which Destiny is mere vacillation. Charles felt impatient of the presence of these two letters, staring at him reproachfully from the letter-rack with an inscription on it "For the Post!" So he took them himself to the Chemist's and Druggist's down the road, wavered an instant before the official slot that yawned laterally for them, laughed at his irresolution, and thrust them in. Now they would go, come what might! He felt happier, as though he had done something. Well—what else was there to do?

He walked back slowly to The Cedars, thinking—thinking of the Past. How unlike the Present was—this Present—to the vague Future that had been foreseen by him and Fred that first time that he visited the house! Where was that scheme of a double household now? Where was the bride that was to have been Fred's? A female Analytical Chemist, the step-parent of several small Analytical Chemists, male and female; and the direct parent—so Miss Nancy Fraser had told him—of one whom she had added to their number, like a Committee with powers! How funny it seemed that this Nancy Fraser, who had assumed quite a new identity to Charles, should be the sister of that Cintra of Mrs. Hopkinson's Cinderella, over three years since; and by whom he was ultimately abruptly cancelled, for Heaven knows what reason. What *was* the story of that affair, Charles wondered? He knew or guessed this much, that the pair had been led to discover their indifference to one another owing to some jealous tiff on the part of the lady. "Some other girl in that business!" said he to himself. Who was that other girl? Very likely Fred would have told him all about it if he had asked him. But he had never pressed him on the subject. Would it have been fair to do so?

Well—it was all forgotten now!—a thing of the past. But it had left a residuum—Elbows. And with it remorse in Charles's inner consciousness that he and Fred should have chosen such a disparaging nickname for her. Now, that showed Lucy's penetration. Trust a clever woman's sagacity in these things. "Why"—she had said—"must Fred want to marry that stupid sister, when such a nice girl as that was vacant?" Charles wondered why, now. He supposed Lucy was right, and men were the slaves of mere beauty. Of course Cintra was the better looking of the two. . . . Stop a moment!—was she? His memory had kept a spare corner for the gravity of Nancy's face when she said that her unskilfulness in telling lies was a caution

for snakes. He utilised it to throw doubt on Cintra's superiority, successfully.

It was a satisfaction to him to dwell on these bygones, to take his mind off the torture of the present. He did it mechanically, in self-defence. Behind it was the shadow—the home without a mistress that he was approaching. But courage!—courage! Only a few hours more, and he would be on his way to Lucy! Why—by this time to-morrow he would be across the Channel; or at Dover, anyhow. He would have begun a journey that was to end in Lucy.

But suppose that she . . . Oh, rubbish?—the thing was impossible. He flung the idea from him indignantly, that she really *meant* that odious letter. What would the misgivings of his secret self ask him to believe next?

Much pleasanter now, as well as more commonsense-rife, to pooh-pooh the preposterous notion; at any rate till she, his wife, the mother of his child, met his eyes with the harsh indifference that letter laid claim to on her behalf. Suppose that unnatural absurdity to be actual, what would come next? Well—for choice—a leap over a ship's counter into its track of white sea-foam, with pockets full of shot. For mere handiness, without regard to the inconvenience a slovenly unwholesome corpse would occasion to his survivors, sixpennyworth of potassic cyanide, which would have been cyanide of potassium when he was young, which could be obtained easily of any dealer in photographic chemicals. It was highly recommended for purposes of suicide, and there was only one way of using it. A great advantage that, over the bare bodkin Hamlet talked so confidently about.

Tush—he was laughing at his own folly! It wasn't going to come to that, but to joint laughter of Lucy and himself at their two absurdities; to the lips and eyes and warm embrace of reconciliation. And then she, Lucy, could pour out gratitude without reserve at the feet of that good creature—she *was* a good creature—who had been such a help to him when that detestable letter had to be read; who had produced her Aunt Cæcilia's "mental alienation" with such promptitude. Charles would be grateful to Nancy all the days of his life for "mental alienation." But he couldn't kiss her, and call her a darling, for it. Luce could. . . . By-the-bye, what *is* mental alienation?

Was mental alienation the undefined agency that caused poor old Stultifex Maximus to wander away, up this very lane, to Heaven knows where? That was a strange story. That a man

in the prime of life—the prime of *his* life, though maybe the ending stage of a lesser man's—should suddenly vanish away like Waring, who gave us all the slip? And this too when his alternative of land-travel or sea-faring was not the aimless pacing up and down of London town, but the business of the busiest of men, the absorption and fascination of the human gardener's work, the intense responsibility of giving to each human twig its bent, that was to make the inch sapling of a forest tree half a century hence! Fancy that sapling on the watch for him, only two days later!

Observe that the belief in Charles's return was so rooted that the murder, or other violent death, which might be crossed off the possibilities. It would have been found out long ago, in practice—that was the reply to any such suggestion. It was true that even Scotland Yard could not give a negative, but we had to be content with something short of proof absolute, every day. *He* was satisfied, anyhow; enough as for being satisfied that the old gentleman would return, that was a thing about which no man could prophesy.

A perambulator, wheeled by a nursemaid, who was acting as interpreter for its occupant; who, if he had really expressed pleasure at the sight of his papa, had done it in the alphabetically limited tongue the story has referred to. Tilly Slowboy was in charge alone, for the miraculous cure had not undertaken to last if the lumbago patient ran any risks. Being unchecked by the presence of an Authority, the young lady ventured on a translation of what seemed only a gurgle or splutter, to the effect that Master Charles had expressed a wish to be took out of his pram and carried by his pa.

Charles accepted this exegesis as sound, and his burden devoted itself, or himself, to interpreting his bearer's eyesight and compromising his own security. He seemed greatly pleased with his father's protest:—"I say, young man, if you go on jobbing me in the eye like that, I shall tumble into the gutter and you'll be killed!"

"I declare now," said the nursemaid just after their arrival at the house, "if that blessed child isn't trying to read his pa's letters!" He may have been, but he had never learned to read, and a bystander unaccustomed to children might have supposed he was trying to stuff them down his throat. The post had occurred in Charles's absence, and had shed letters. A flash of momentary hope crossed his mind that one of them might be from Lucy in a repentant mood—a revise of her former letter.

But as soon as Miss Slowboy, in response to his:—"Here—catch hold of this chap," had disencumbered him of Master Charles, he had to face another disappointment. There was no letter—only picture-books of cigar-boxes, and facsimiles of Dukes' signatures to appeals for cash.

However, it was one o'clock, and luncheon, however irksome in profound solitude, marked a bygone episode, and sighted the end of another. What could he do with this interregnum of a few hours that would skip by so quickly if he wanted them to stop? Go for a walk?—Yes, that was the safest course open to him. He had made up his mind not to see his mother-in-law—not on her merits; polite usage demanded that he should conceal a personal sentiment—but because he felt that, short of mental alienation, he was *not* bound to take her into his confidence about a fit of *pique* of her daughter's. That was it—a fit of *pique*! But observe!—more than half the blame of it was his. She was human; but not culpable, thank you!

As for the bare possibility that she was in earnest, it had crossed his mind a few hours since certainly, but by now it had made up its own not to do so again. And it should cross no other mind than his—at least as a consequence of any confidences from him about that letter he had torn up. The thing should be buried out of sight, and forgotten.

He went for a long walk, to kill as much time as possible. He was better losing his way in country lanes—you can do so still within five-and-twenty miles of Charing Cross—than in brooding over his anxieties at home. If he could have relied upon his son's company he would have fallen back upon it, as that young man's views of life pleased him. Everything, according to Master Charles, was either the best of jokes or the deadliest of injuries, which a man of his inches could only resent by becoming a mere mass—however small—of erumped fury, and hitting out right and left at space.

The image of the young gentleman, carried upstairs in this latter mood by Miss Slowboy, soothed his father through many miles of country lanes and field paths, and still dominated him when he returned home over three hours after he started. He treasured, behind this image a hope that the first voice that would greet his return would be *hers*—that baby's mother's—a welcome arrival in his absence, having had a repentant fit and started for home a few hours after posting that ridiculous letter. The hope became, as he walked up the gravel road to the house, a fear that nothing so good as that was in store for him; and

later on, after a doorstep pause with his ears painfully on the alert, a certainty to that effect. So he had to pretend that no such anticipation had ever germinated.

No member of the household saw him return, because it consisted, so far as he was concerned when he was replacing his Panama hat on its peg, and his stick in the stand below it, of remote voices in the kitchen and nursery. He passed unnoticed into the smoking-room, and sank back on the couch on which, only this morning, he had been as unconscious as a stone, and had come back to a painful consciousness in time to avert a visit from the doctor. He felt none the worse for that occurrence physically, but his head swam, and he mistrusted his judgment.

Sometimes, when one's brain gets clouded in this way, it is a relief to find some simple thing that wants doing, that one may, by doing it, get into touch with current event again. Such a thing presented itself to Charles—that Continental Bradshaw which ought to have travelled with them to Paris! It should go there to-morrow, anyhow. A vision of Lucy and himself, reconciled like the couple in *Divorçons*, taking a little dinner *de noces* at the Europe at Lucerne—or even better, at Lugano with Fred and his mother—passed across the proscenium of his intelligence. He picked the book up, and carried it towards his room, explicitly to add it to the contents of a small handbag of after-maths which he was scheming to carry with him next day. It would be the text-book of that banquet—would suggest the when and where of next day's journey.

The young woman, Anne, was passing down from the nursery with a milk jug, probably to renew the supply Master Charles spent time, that could not possibly have been better employed, in assimilating. Anne always resorted to a sort of chromatic scale when she addressed gentlemen, which expressed—suppose we say?—a readiness for appreciation, but is itself impossible to any known calligraphy or printing-type. The reader must imagine it prefaced to her remark to her master, as she saw him emerge from his private sanctum, bearing the Continental Bradshaw:—“Haven't you seen the gentleman, Sir?”

“I? I haven't seen any gentleman. What gentleman?”

“In the setting-room. . . . The gentleman in the setting-room. Only he wasn't showed in by me, so I couldn't say. I only come upon him, as you might say.”

“What sort of gentleman?” Charles's hand was too near the handle of the door where the gentleman was for this to be a

reasonable question. But it arose out of the previous conversation.

Anne stopped a moment to consider how she could make her reply distinguished, and show a wide range of social information; then replied:—"A gentleman in horders." Her pride in this way of describing a clergyman resulted in a powerful aspirate on the initial of the last word. Charles remembered that he had a pound in gold in his pocket. This parson could only mean subscriptions. He felt his coat outside, and decided that he was safe. He could face the local curate whom he anticipated, with the consciousness of such a coin available.

The curate he anticipated was a small man, meek and pink. So unlike the man that he expected was the one that was waiting to see him, that he could not have discarded at a moment's notice the words ready for utterance on his tongue, and found others to meet the position, even had there been no other bewildering circumstance in his identity. But that this man of all others should be actually standing there before his eyes . . . !

Was it real?—that was his first thought. Was it not some hallucination of his own brain, at odds with reality after that overwhelming experience of the morning? Was it not delusion pure and simple, this image of an old divine, broad-chested and strong of limb, straight as an arrow for all that—unless his white hairs belied him—his years, weighing heavily on a weaker constitution, would have meant a hundred infirmities, or decrepitude outright? Was it not more likely that Charles, wrought to the extremest tension first by his anxiety about his wife's safety, and then by the contents of the letter that had ended it, should go clean off his head and become the victim of a delusion than that his old master, old Stultifex Maximus—he remembered him well, though he had scarcely seen him since schooldays—should reappear inexplicably, after being despaired of, for two years? He knew that he himself had always predicted this, but when it came, its strangeness almost stunned him.

The only words he could find were:—"Good God—Dr. Carteret!" He would have liked the grasp of his extended hand to make good by its cordiality the defect of welcoming speech. But the old gentleman seemed to shrink from his touch—in fact, placed his own right hand without disguise behind his back.

"Yes, Snaith—Dr. Carteret. . . . Excuse me. Do as I tell you, and ask no questions. The time will come for explanation later. For the present, let me ask you to be content without—

without touching me, in short. Treat it as a whim if you will, and a strange one, but let me have my way. Is that understood?"

He was mad of course, and the whole thing was accounted for. So Charles said to himself. But our schoolmasters remain our schoolmasters to the end. He felt that it was not for him to dispute the fiat of Stultifex Maximus, mad or sane. He spoke for a scattered host of fellow-schoolboys at Vexton when he replied:—"Your will is our law, Sir. We don't question—we obey." Any one of that host would have said the same. Charles had a half-laugh for the position, but he spoke in good faith, for all that.

The old gentleman—one thing was evident; he was perfectly harmless—seemed pleased. "I am glad to see that you remember the old days, Snaith," said he. He then went on talking, evidently with regret for his loss of the school, but without referring to his inexplicable and needless renunciation of it:—"If men—men who have thought fit to be the authors of other men—could only see clearly the overwhelming importance of every moment of boyhood to the hours and years of manhood that are to follow, it would simply change the race. If boys, good in themselves, were not left to lie fallow, or to get intoxicated with the taste of so-called pleasure—gross mud honey, Tennyson calls it—they would grow up as good as girls. Men would be as good as women. You think, Snaith, that I am talking professional shop. . . ."

"Not at all!" said Charles.

"However, I was. I was just on the point of coming to the schoolmaster's estimate of his own importance to the World. So it *was* professional shop. If I had been permitted to continue at the school for a while longer . . ." He spoke wistfully, as of a thing to regret.

Now, thought Charles, he will say something to throw a light on his seemingly insane action. He, however, seemed to become suddenly silent. A reminder might keep him to his topic. So Charles said:—"I understand from what you are saying, Doctor, that you were under some compulsion in leaving the school. I have no right to be inquisitive, but . . ."

"But you would like to be told? Is that it?"

"Something of that sort. Yes."

"You ask to be told, in fact."

"Well—I do."

The firm frown on the Doctor's brow strengthened slightly

from increased consideration; his closed lips met more decisively. At last he spoke. "On the whole, no!" said he, as though answering a question that called for an affirmative or negative. "I might tell you *something*—yes! But enough to satisfy your wish for information—a perfectly natural one, Snaith, a perfectly natural one—certainly *not*! And my time is limited. So I must beg you to be content with my assurance that my non-return to my duties at the school"—the sound of regret came again in his voice—"was not a matter of choice, but of necessity. At that, I stop. I am sorry."

His speech was so clear and calm, and his manner so settled and decisive, that no reasonable doubt could remain about the diagnosis of his mental disorder. Manifestly one of those rare cases of mind-disease pure and simple, where autopsy of the brain shows no lesion or disintegration of the organ! Charles saw this plainly, and knew that discussion of the point would be useless. He had said he had a wish to know, so he could not disclaim curiosity. It was a case for *glisser, sans s'appuyer*. So he said lightly:—"Never mind! I shall know in time, perhaps."

"In time—*perhaps*!" The Doctor repeated his words, accenting the last one. He added thoughtfully, half to himself:—"The thing may remain unknown, for a very long time." Then as one who dismissed one subject to take up another, he added:—"But I am here with a purpose. I wish to speak to you about Fred."

Charles was glad. He had felt very uneasy in many ways about Fred. Yet there was no one to whom he could talk about Fred's affairs without reserve; unless indeed he overstepped the limits that he conceived Fred's confidence imposed on him. Had he been in Fred's mother's, he might have tried to approach the subject; but he and she were little more than cordial acquaintances. Now, here was a man of great weight and authority with both young men, and somewhat *in loco parentis* to one of them, who would be very likely to break through all reserves—if indeed he knew anything of Fred's mysterious love-affair—and might in any case deal with the subject in such a way as to justify allusion to it. Therefore, Charles was glad, and met his visitor's wish half-way. "It is very satisfactory to me to hear you say that," said he. "For to tell you the truth, that young man has been a source of anxiety to me. I think he wants advice, and I don't feel qualified to speak to him. . . . But I wish, Doctor, you would sit down, instead of standing on that hearthrug. Do come

in this armchair, and I will ring for some tea, if you don't mind having it so late." No, the Doctor would prefer to take no tea, he said.

Nor did he rise to an invitation to remain on to dinner. Nor to coffee, nor to chocolate, nor even to a cigarette. He would take absolutely nothing, thank you! He, however, settled down in the armchair, and Charles was not sorry to come to an anchor opposite to him, for his long walk had qualified him for a rest. He had some misgiving that his guest's mind, under these interruptions, might have wandered from its subject.

But it was set at rest when the old man resumed the conversation by repeating very nearly the words he had himself used a moment back:—"Fred wants advice, and you are not qualified to give it. Quite so. But you *are* qualified to repeat advice from his guardian. In fact, I have a message to send to Fred, touching his own affairs. You will give it him."

"I can write it to him, and will do so at once." And yet, for all that Charles's manner was that of one who was taking his guest's wish as a matter of course, and could readily undertake a mere embassy, he was in fact saying to himself:—"How comes the old boy to know anything of Fred's affairs now?" What kept Dr. Carteret in touch with his own circle, when every avenue that connected it with the outer world had been explored in vain to find a trace of him? What was the secret connecting link? But whatever Charles thought, he showed no curiosity. The old boy was *non compos* without a doubt, and that would cover everything.

He, however, was perfectly sane to all outward seeming, as he went on to formulate this message to Fred. He paused now and then to pick a word carefully, but otherwise showed no hesitation or embarrassment. "You are already aware, Snaith," he said, "that my nephew's engagement to marry of two years' since was broken off because the young lady suspected—and with good reason—that his affections were far from undivided?"

"I have a fair insight into that matter; a bystander's insight. I have never talked to Fred about it. I mean, that my information comes through another channel."

"Your information is correct. But are you fully alive to the fact that this unhappy infatuation has persisted—has if anything increased—during this last two years?" How came the old boy to be able to speak with such certainty?

Charles was puzzled at this, as well he might be. But he thought it safest to express no surprise—to take everything as a

matter of course. He replied:—"Well—I have at least had no reason to suppose it has diminished."

The answer came in the same quiet, positive way. "There is no reason to suppose it. You may rely on me for this. Under these circumstances it is my duty to do all I can to avert disastrous consequences, and to help the poor foolish fellow against himself."

"And mine," said Charles parenthetically.

The old man's answer was peculiar. "*You can do nothing.*"

Its perfect quietness, and the speaker's conviction as of an obvious truth, seemed to imply some special reason why Charles, of all mankind, should be powerless to help. Yet he himself only saw in it—for a man stone-blind sees nothing—another symptom of insanity on the Doctor's part. To ascertain sanity he would have said:—"Why can *I* do nothing, who am surely almost Fred's brother?" To the Doctor he only said:—"Perhaps not," and let him continue:—"Except indeed the thing I have come here to ask of you. You can do that."

Charles, utterly perplexed about what this was going to lead to, could only reply:—"You may trust me to do anything that is within my power," and wait.

He felt more than ever convinced of the old man's insanity when he heard his next words:—"Have you a good memory?" and saw the knitted brow and concentrated gaze of the speaker. It reminded him of chance moments in bygone years—in Vexton School, in the old days.

"I *have* to have a good memory, Doctor," said he. "It is a professional asset. A solicitor with a bad memory is doomed to failure. I assure you I cultivate mine. Go on."

"Try to remember all that I say to you, and repeat it to Fred, as from me. Never mind the strangeness of it. I mean the strangeness of my telling it to you. You will come to understand the reasons of my doing so, some time."

Better to indulge his whim, thought Charles. "I will remember every word, to the best of my ability," said he.

"Yes. And ask for no explanations, but repeat my words to Fred, as near as you can." He made the pause of a speaker who leaves further prelude, and steps to his main subject. "It has come to my knowledge—never mind how—that Fred questions the possibility of concealing a misplaced passion from its object. Well—it has been done, and I want him to know it. It would strengthen him against himself."

"Very reasonable, Sir! But why not say this to Fred him-

self? It would have more influence on him than coming through an intermediary."

"You would not ask that question, Snaith, if you knew all the circumstances of the case. Let me ask you again not to press me for details which I cannot give. For one thing, there are difficulties in the way of seeing Frederic. I must ask you to accept the fact from me, without further explanation, that I cannot write to him."

Where was the use of doing anything with a man evidently insane? There could be no reason why a letter should not carry a message as well as a messenger; indeed better, for one takes a messenger into confidence. Mad, evidently! Charles hastened to apologize for seeming inquisitiveness. "I did not mean to ask questions," he said. "It was merely by way of suggestion. Do not let me interrupt you, Sir."

The severe countenance of the old School King relaxed whenever Charles spoke to him as a pupil—for that was what his form of speech meant—and there was satisfaction in his voice. "No harm, Snaith," said he. "I will go on and say what I have to say. My time is necessarily short. I am asking you to tell Fred from me that he is not alone—very far from it—in his . . . unhappy entanglement of the affections." He paused a moment to find the right phrase, then continued:—"I wish him to know that his guardian and old schoolmaster, his father's brother—yes, Snaith, I myself!—lived from youth to old age under the burden of a secret passion, impossible of requital even if its object could have suspected it. Tell him that the birth of this passion was in the girlhood—the childhood—of the woman who was to rule my heart through life; that it had possession of every fibre of my soul long and long before the fatal knowledge came one day that it was hopeless and purposeless. Tell him that in its inception there was no trace of guilty intrusion on the rights of another, no shadow of blame such as may attach to the would-be lover who seeks to undermine a woman's pledge given elsewhere. Tell him that, so as to make him understand what my position was. . . . You understand it yourself?" He stopped to ask this question abruptly in a rush of emphatic speech which seemed to have taken possession of him, rather than to be spoken by him, and awaited the answer with knitted brows. It made his hearer a boy again to see him—a boy at one of the class exams; at the old school at Vexton, years ago.

But, although taken aback to find himself the recipient of such a confidence, coming to him with such an overwhelming sudden-

ness, Charles answered clearly and directly:—"I understand perfectly. You fell in love with a very young girl, and she came to an understanding with another lover, perhaps before . . ."

"Yes—go on."

" . . . before you thought she was old enough to know anything about such matters. Was that it?"

"That was so, as you put it. Make Fred understand this clearly. If you cannot remember my exact words, give my meaning in your own. It may be more intelligible—I do not know. Then, having no quite sure that he grasps these facts, tell him that circumstances compelled me to a forced concealment of every feeling, a forced repression of every impulse, throughout a long term of years—a term as long as a lifetime. And to me it was a lifetime—a painful one; the latter part of it worse than the first. For, until that lady's husband was taken from her . . ."

"He is dead, then?"

The Doctor seemed to pause a moment before answering:—"Well—yes. That is the shortest way of putting it. He is dead. During his life on earth, my love for him helped me against my love for his wife, and I was able to feel that my self-repression was not all fruitless. Someone benefited by it. But when he departed . . ." He seemed to hesitate.

Charles recalled his last word, as a catchword of speech; but added to it, without thinking. "'When he departed this life,'" said he, "how then?"

Dr. Carteret appeared to reflect, but only for a brief moment. Then he said, more to himself than to Charles:—"Let it pass." Then definitely to Charles:—"He departed from us. Suppose we put it that way! . . . Well—anyhow! When he left us, he left me alone with his still young wife and her baby son—left me to endure the torture of her friendship without the right to call it love, and to take over the responsibilities of a parent towards his boy. . . ." He stopped abruptly, with his eyes keenly fixed on Charles. "Do you begin to understand me?" said he. "I think so."

For Charles's face showed the dawning of an idea—but its surprise was due more to the fact that this idea had never dawned before than to any intrinsic oddity of the idea itself. On the contrary, his word to himself was:—"How strange that I never saw that before! Of course—Fred's mother." To Dr. Carteret he said:—"I think I understand you. But I don't think anyone ever suspected it. Certainly not Fred."

"Certainly not Fred. Fred will deny the possibility of it when you give him particulars of this interview. He will look on what I have said as the words . . . as, in short, the words of a madman. But he will come to think otherwise. I am not mad—I never was more sane in my life—never was so sane would be nearer the truth." Charles bore these words in mind; at the time as an additional testimony, if any were wanted, of the diseased state of the speaker's faculties, but later as a curious subject of speculation. Dr. Carteret resumed the main thread of his communication, saying:—"That is neither here nor there. Let it be as it is. I want you, Snaith, to lose no time in communicating to Fred, as from me, the particulars I have given you of my own life—a life of self-repression and renunciation. I wish him to be influenced by them. I do not know if you are alive to the fact that Fred has it in his mind to leave England permanently, solely that he may be at a distance from a temptation he may be unable to resist. It is a pusillanimous and cowardly action. Let him grasp his nettle as I grasped mine, for twenty long years and more. That is the manly course. And mark you this, Snaith! This passion of my nephew's is a spurious one—a disease of the imagination as much as the heart. Such a passion, nursed in the absence of its object, may poison the best years of a life—may be a man's undoing. I have little doubt that in time it would die a natural death."

Charles could not help entering a protest. "In time! Yes—but in *what* time, Doctor? You have just spoken of your own—your own aberration. . . . Excuse me!—well, suppose we say *entichement* . . . having lasted over twenty years. What right have we to suppose that Fred's would be more short-lived? May he not be taking the wisest course, after all . . .?"

"In running away from himself? No. The two women are absolutely unlike. He would come to know . . . that is to say, would come to form an entirely different estimate of this woman who has intoxicated him."

"Do you know her?"

Dr. Carteret did not answer at once. He looked at his watch, a massive gold repeater which in other days had decided all discussions about the accuracy of school-time with the certainty of Greenwich. "My time is short," said he. "I must finish. . . . Yes—I have seen the lady."

Charles's curiosity was keenly roused. He half forgot his belief in the unsoundness of the Doctor's mind; indeed, the old gentleman's perfectly collected speech and manner were in them-

selves enough to refute such an idea, even in the face of all the collateral proof to the contrary. Charles could not resist the question that rose to his lips. "Seen the lady? Where have you seen the lady?"

Dr. Carteret shut his watch with a snap, and returned it to his pocket. He then replied, with a quiet assurance that completely silenced further enquiries:—"I am not at liberty, Snaith, to say anything that would enable you to identify her. Let me ask you again not to press for details which I cannot give. I must tell you that the knowledge you ask for would not in any way favour the transmission of my message to Fred, which is the object I have in view. If anything, the reverse." He seemed to wait for comment; then as Charles made none, asked somewhat abruptly:—"Where do you suppose he is at this moment? Perhaps you don't know."

"I think I do. At least, I know the address he left in Paris—Hotel Washington, Lugano."

"Well—will you write to him there at once, giving him word for word what I said to you just now? Tell him nothing about my sudden reappearance and disappearance in this way. Nothing could be gained by it. I will only say to you this much about it—that I am not a responsible agent. I cannot even account to myself for my position. . . . No—I can explain nothing, and I must go, as my time is up. Ask for no explanations."

"One moment, Dr. Carteret! Only a word. You must surely see that it will be very difficult to word your message in a letter to Fred. How am I to account for it?"

"Don't account for it. Give it."

"Without a word of explanation of the circumstances under which I received it?"

The Doctor thought a moment. "You can say," said he, "that I returned to give you this message for him. That's enough."

"He won't believe it. He'll think I've gone dotty on the brain."

"Very possibly. But he won't continue to do so. He will be convinced by collateral evidence. You need not be uneasy on that score."

An idea presented itself to Charles's mind, and was welcomed by it. "Would not this way do, Doctor?" said he. "Don't pooh-pooh it offhand. Suppose I send the letter out to my wife, and leave it to her to break the news of your return and give

it to him to read. He will be overjoyed—at your return, I mean. Do let me manage it that way. Don't say no!"

"No—that would not suit me, and would not suit the circumstances. I am sorry to have to negative that proposal. . . . But where is your wife? Is she at the Washington Hotel, Lugano, too?"

"I am not positively certain where she is at this moment. She wrote from Lucerne, but may have gone on to Lugano. I shall have a letter this evening, and shall go out to join her to-morrow." He half persuaded himself this was all gospel. "I wish I could induce you to . . ."

"To let you tell her all this, for her to repeat to Fred. As you are going out to her, you of course could easily do so. But my wish is that you do no such thing. It would not suit me at all. I have decided that this should be written by you to Fred, or repeated to him personally. Is that understood?" If the Doctor had been propounding the Law to schoolboys in revolt, he could not have spoken more draconically.

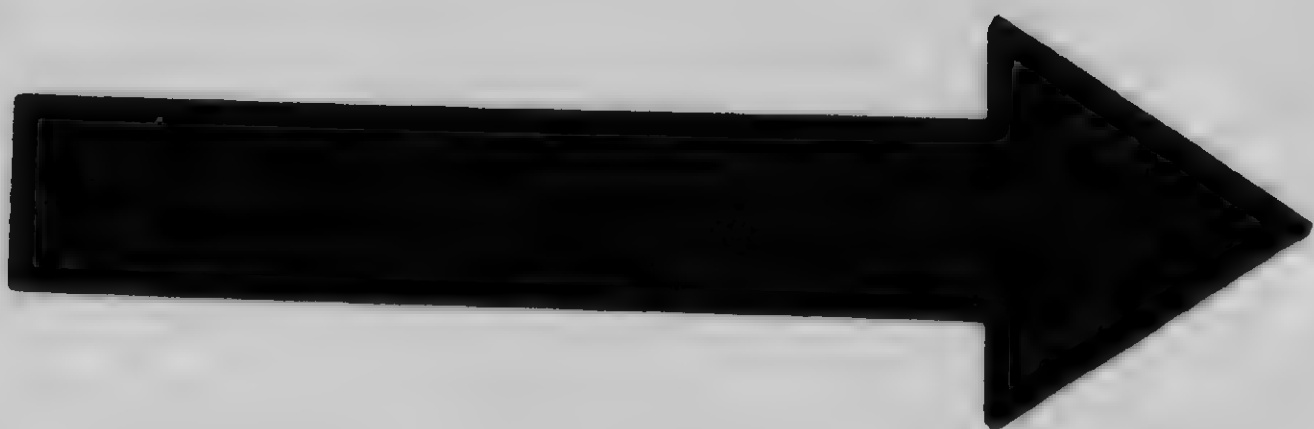
Charles felt his ruling power, and bowed before it. Once a headmaster, always a headmaster. "Of course I should not dream of doing anything contrary to your wishes, Sir," he said. "Only, women sometimes *put* points better than men. They handle this subject with greater delicacy."

"Very likely. But I do not wish your wife to handle this particular subject at all. So that's understood." Charles nodded assent, and the old gentleman proceeded:—"Now, there is one other point, and I am afraid, Snaith, that my insisting upon it may seem to you arbitrary. I have no address."

"But, for Fred's sake, you will communicate it when you have one."

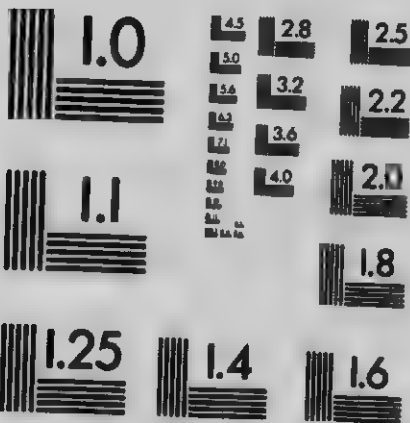
"Not only for Fred's sake, but for my sister's, for the school's sake—for your own, for that matter. But it is not a matter of will and won't. It is a matter of ability. I cannot give you any account of my whereabouts. It is a subject on which I cannot speak positively. This may seem strange to you. I must ask you to rest contented with it."

Midsummer madness, evidently! If he had said:—"I am unsettled at present, but will communicate with you as soon as I am able to speak definitely," it might have seemed odd, but could not have implied insanity. Charles kept off arguing the point as unsafe, but softened an abrupt departure from it by saying:—"Fred will be inconsolable at not being able to rush to you at once. Do you know, Doctor, I am not exaggerating when I say



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that your return to life—to *our* life, I mean,—will be looked upon by all your friends as a resurrection from the dead. It will indeed."

"You don't say so!" said the Doctor. But he did not seem concerned with the opinion of his friends; a little amused, perhaps. He was wiping his glasses as he spoke, and when he replaced them, he looked round the room. "No change here," said he, "except paint and paper . . . you know, I *saw* this house before the alterations."

"Oh yes—of course I heard of *that*," Charles hesitated over speech about the sequel. Before he could frame it to his liking, the old boy spoke again.

"The bit I was best pleased with," said he, "was the big staircase out there, and a long passage with windows, looking on the garden."

"It's rather fetching," said Charles. "Come and look at it. Through here." He led the way.

"I don't remember *this*," said Dr. Carteret, stopping at the new door, and placing the palm of his hand against the panel. "There was no door here."

"No—that door's new. Look at it. A fine old bit of mahogany from an old house they pulled down in Jermyn Street—Sir Something Mordaunt's." They passed through, to be met by the clamour of the parrakeets; which stopped suddenly, and left their loquacity free to talk about the newcomer, among themselves.

"Yes—this is the place"—said the Doctor. "But you have done wonders with it, Snaith. It was dilapidated enough then."

"I rather make it a rule," said Charles, "to have this place kept *point-de-vise*. My wife has taken a rather absurd dislike to it, and I want her to get over it. I don't see why I shouldn't tell you the reason. It was because that drunken old charwoman, who showed you over the house, told how she left you here to answer a bell—I think—and nobody saw you again. That gave my wife a painful association with the place."

"I'm sorry," said Dr. Carteret.

"There was some stupid nonsense about its being impossible for you to leave the house without being seen, which made it worse. Now when you go, I will ask you to show me which way you went out then, and that will reinstate this passage in my wife's eyes. At present she won't sit here in the summer because she hates the place. And that's her only reason."

"You wish me, I understand, to show you how I left this house?"

"Only which door you went out at. . . . But it doesn't matter." He added the last words because of an odd expression on the Doctor's face, for which he saw no explanation. It reminded him that perhaps he was dealing with a lunatic.

"I should be delighted, Snaith," said Dr. Carteret, "to comply with such a very reasonable request, if it were within my power to do so. But honestly, I do not know."

"Do not know which door you went out by!" Charles was sorry for having shown astonishment, as the condition of his visitor's mind became more and more manifest to him.

"That is so. My memory is clear up to the moment of the old woman's departure. I remember nothing further. I am compelled to leave much unexplained. Let me press you not to question me on this subject. I am certain to be misunderstood, and have decided to keep silence."

Charles saw through the whole thing now. The old man's "mental alienation"—or, rather, total aberration of mind—had come upon him at that very moment when the old woman saw him preparing to wind up his inspection of the premises. Naturally all that followed was a cloudland of confusions. Probably what he said was true, that he could not make a consecutive narrative of it if he would. Charles felt that the narrative he had just heard, that he was to transmit to Fred, might be relied on as the outcome of a lucid interval. It was odd that its narrator should be so outspoken on such a subject, but there was no trace of insanity about it.

His own responsibility in the face of the facts began to disquiet him. Was it prudent to allow the old man to depart, when to do so might be to lose sight of him again outright? What would Fred say to him if he tamely acquiesced in such an end to this strange visit? On the other hand, how could he detain him without calling help, if he persisted in departing without leaving any satisfactory clue to his whereabouts? It would only be possible if the grey head and the wrinkles of visible age meant senile weakness, and even then such weakness, in a frame that must once have possessed great athletic powers—and indeed Charles knew that his old master had been famous in his time in this respect—would have been strength compared to his own modest physical capacity. Add to this the well-known fact that the muscular developments of insanity are sometimes gigantic and quite unaccountable. No—he would have to call in Tom

the gardener and his able-bodied son, Jack, whose voices he had heard mixing with those of the household as they passed the foot of the great staircase. But he shrank from the idea of violent restraint, although he believed that Law might back him in employing it in this instance.

Stop!—was there no half-way between simply letting him go and taking him prisoner? Yes—there was. He might be followed—kept in view and watched, until his tracker was satisfied that he was run home to his domicile. This was not in Charles's line; besides, he would arouse suspicion if seen, and set the well-known cunning of insanity on the alert. But there was Jack, son of Tom, totally unknown to the Doctor, and as sharp as a razor.

"Would you excuse me for half a minute, Doctor? I want to give a message to a young man I heard in the kitchen just now, and I'm afraid he may run away without seeing me." Thus Charles to the Doctor, who replied:—"Oh, certainly, certainly! Don't hurry on my account." Said Charles then, remembering that instructions may take time:—"Well—two or three minutes, then!—not long, anyhow!"

He paused a moment outside the new door. It would never do to call Jack up and talk to him outside that new door. Suppose the Doctor came out! Neither would it do to go out of sight of it. The Doctor might slip through and be off as he had done before. He turned the key carefully, and went on towards the kitchen.

He found Jack, who understood what was wanted of him with amazing rapidity. He might have been in training for a detective. It was arranged that he should make a feint of working near the garden gates, and should happen to be knocking off work just as the governor accompanied his visitor down the gravel path to see him off. Then, he was to throw down his tools and follow unseen.

It may have taken more than the three minutes to arrange this, but that did not matter, as the door was locked and there was absolutely no other exit except the door leading into the back garden through the greenhouse. Charles had not a shadow of doubt as to finding Dr. Carteret where he left him.

"Sorry to be so long," he began to say, before he had turned the corner of the passage. He did not get to the last word. He found himself speaking to no one. He called out:—"Doctor—where are you?" But no answer came. He jumped to the only conclusion possible. Dr. Carteret had walked out into the

garden. He went along the passage absolutely confident of this until he turned the handle of the door, and found it locked. So dominant was the idea that the old man *must* be in the garden—because, where else could he be?—that he had actually begun to turn the key to go out before he remembered that it would not have locked itself after the Doctor's exit.

When an apparent impossibility happens, the brain reels; nothing can be relied on. Man's terms with sanity, with logic, with everything that can give the mind a secure foothold, are broken through, and mistrust of sight, touch, and hearing saps his judgment and leaves him helpless. Charles grew sick with fear that perhaps his own faculties were unhinged. Was this return of his old schoolmaster all a dream? Had his recent anxiety unsettled his understanding? No—that was out of the question. Had not the servants seen the old gentleman before he did?

He ran back into the house, calling loudly to whomsoever might be in hearing. Where was Dr. Carteret, the old gentleman he had been talking with in the parlour? . . . Yes—he had left him in the greenhouse passage less than ten minutes ago to speak to Jack, and now he was nowhere to be found!

From the kitchen below and the nursery above came the womankind of the household; normal at first, then gradually infected with the master's alarm. The gentleman must be somewhere. He couldn't be off of it. That was cook's decision. Anne the housemaid went further, and said he must be in the house, as she had never been rang for to let him out. Pinning her faith on this, she passed into the passage where he ought to have been; the import of her demeanour being, that her shrewder insight would at once discern the whereabouts of

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CHAPTER XXXIV

THE story would now have told how Charles's utter bewilderment at the disappearance of his old schoolmaster was increased and intensified by the hysterical excitement of the household. No one had let Dr. Carteret in, or been near the front door since Charles left the house for his walk. He knew he had closed the door on leaving the house, and let himself in with his latchkey on his return. As for the back entrance, that opened into the kitchen, so that no one could have entered that way unperceived. The kitchen, as all the evidence went to prove, had been tenanted the whole afternoon. Anne, the housemaid, who found the visitor in the study waiting to see Mr. Snaith, had naturally concluded that one of the others must have shown him in. Tom, the gardener, when cross-questioned admitted having seen a tall stout gentleman through the study window, but had not seen him come up to the house; in fact, the mystery seemed to grow, and as poor Charles settled himself down to a cigar after an uncomfortable and agitated meal that evening, his thoughts turned eagerly to the journey to meet Lucy on the following day. He felt if he could join her at Lucerne, and then both go on together and pick up Fred, life would become sane again. The message to Fred was an additional reason for hurrying off. Fred might be able to suggest an explanation, and anyhow it showed that Lucy was not alone in her strange experiences in the house.

Perhaps that had been at the bottom of all the trouble. He had been so hard and unsympathetic with her, and her nerves had been unduly tried all round.

That it was the Doctor himself Charles could not reasonably doubt. Who, and what, else could it have been?

Furthermore that he was mad was perfectly evident. Of course some natural explanation of his disappearance would be found; such things always were explainable. Still, it was very odd, very odd indeed. He must be hiding somewhere near, but then those locked doors! There certainly was something queer about the house! Lucy had always said so. They would discuss it together, and it would form a new bond of sympathy between them. Could there be a secret way leading to some hitherto unknown exit?

Such things had been heard of in old houses, but then that passage led only to the greenhouse, and that was locked from the inside.

No, he gave it up, he must wait for Lucy and Fred; they might possibly be able to throw some light on the mystery; and completely worn out by the events of the day, Charles fell to dozing over his cigar.

A sharp knock at the door roused him with a start, and Mrs. Gorhambury stood before him. Pompous and important, she informed him of fresh difficulties that beset his path. The servants were all so upset by the uncanny occurrence of the afternoon that they declared they could not stop in the house.

Two of them whose homes were near had already taken themselves off, refusing to sleep another night at The Cedars; the others vowed they would leave in the morning. Mrs. Gorhambury understood Mr. Snaith was starting for the Continent early the next day, and she felt that under the circumstances she could not risk being left alone in the house with sole charge of the baby; besides, was it safe for the child with such happenings and both Mr. and Mrs. Snaith away?

Poor Charles saw the fix, and at once bethought him of his mother-in-law. He would wire and ask her to take pity on Mrs. Gorhambury and the baby for awhile, and then he need not delay his start. Or stay, a letter would reach Devonshire Place by the first post the next morning, and be more explanatory and less upsetting than a telegram delivered late at night; he would ask Mrs. Hinchliffe to wire her reply in order that he might know in time to be able to catch the midday boat. There could be no difficulty about it; she would be sure to take them in. Indeed, it had already been spoken of, but decided against in favour of Wimbledon air for the child versus Devonshire Place breezes.

So a letter was composed to Mamma Hinchliffe explaining that the household threatened leaving *en bloc*, owing to some silly fancy about ghosts and hauntings. Charles carefully avoided entering into any details as to the real nature of the upset, and dwelt on the need for his joining Lucy with as little delay as possible.

He went out to post the letter himself. The night air was refreshing, there was a bright moon shining, and as Charles walked slowly up the drive to the house he peered behind the laurel bushes, and then leaving the path, he carefully explored every nook and corner of the large garden, half hoping to find

the Doctor's portly frame hiding in the deep shadows cast by the trees in the moonlight. But there was nothing to be seen. He walked along the outer wall of the long passage to examine the windows. Could old Stultifex Maximus have squeezed out that way?

But the windows—there were only two of them—were, as he well knew, small and placed rather high up; moreover, they were guarded by iron grills, relics of the old madhouse days, that Charles had decided not to remove on anti-burglar grounds.

No, that explanation would not work. He let himself in, bolted and barred the door for the night, then set himself the task of exploring all over the house from the cellars to the attics in an exhaustive search for the slightest possible clue to the mystery. Everything appeared normal, not a hole or corner where a portly old gentleman could under any circumstances have taken cover. Charles went into all the empty rooms, looked under all the beds, opened all the cupboards, as he put it "to leave no stone unturned," and, finally taking a last look down the passage, unlocked the door of the greenhouse and looked in at the plants.

A row of small flower pots blacked the gangway. In the absence of the family, the gardener had placed a quantity of cuttings in the greenhouse for protection, so that even had the Doctor been able to overcome the difficulty of letting himself out by that door and locking it after him from the inside, he could not have jumped over such an array of flower pots without causing considerable havoc and disaster.

So there was nothing left to Charles but to acknowledge the insolubility of the problem and go to bed.

The morrow brought a promptly dispatched wire from Mrs. Hinchliffe in reply to Charles's letter. "Impossible take baby. Come and see me eleven o'clock on no account start. Hinchliffe." What could it mean? Lucy must have returned; that was the only explanation that presented itself to Charles's excited brain, and his spirits rose as he prepared to leave the house to go up to town.

He told Mrs. Gorhambury to expect him back by the afternoon, and in all probability Mrs. Snaith as well, when they would decide about the baby and evolve plans.

On arriving at Devonshire Place, with growing confidence, Charles again enquired of the stolid butler "when Mrs. Snaith had arrived," to be again told that no Mrs. Snaith was there.

"But Mrs. Hinchliffe is expecting you, Sir," said the man

with a sort of hesitation in his voice as if to convey a hint at consolation from a distant but respectful sphere.

Mrs. Hinchliffe rose to greet Charles with a certain nervousness in her manner that he had never detected in her before, and that forced the conviction upon him that something very unusual and upsetting had occurred. Slowly Charles learned from his mother-in-law that she had sent for him because she gathered from his letter received that morning that he was totally in the dark as to the scandal Lucy had communicated direct to her mother in her letter of the previous day. Otherwise how could Charles be contemplating joining her in Switzerland? She thought it better he should see the letter for himself, without loss of time. He might be able to throw some light on it, or he might not, how could she tell? All she bargained for was, that the vulgarity of motives imputed to her by her daughter might be spared her, and that for the honour of the family, some means might be found of hushing things up, and bringing Lucy back to a sense of duty.

Lucy's letter openly accused her mother of having manipulated her marriage, with a view to a possible title in the future, and brusquely told her that she was now deeply in love with another man, and that they had both decided that they would kick over the traces and belong to each other, that she was very sorry for poor Charles, whom she regarded with affectionate respect, but that if he had been erred against it was entirely her mother's doing. She, Lucy, could not be expected to starve all her life because the feast her mother had provided for her was not to her taste.

Mrs. Hinchliffe then proceeded to tell Charles how she had promptly sent for her great friend Mrs. Bannister Stair, who, after reading Lucy's letter, actually said it was what she had been expecting all along, and that for her part she had not a shadow of doubt as to who the man was.

Who else could it be but Fred Carteret? She had known it must come to that from the very first time she saw them together. In fact, anyone with eyes in their head would have known what to expect.

Charles felt stunned and dazed; the whole fabric of his life seemed to be crumbling. Fred, his beloved Fred! the thing was impossible!! No, he could not believe it, he must go at once to Maida Vale. True, both Mrs. Carteret and her son were the other side of the Channel, still he might find out from the servants if Mrs. Carteret had left Paris, and then if he could get

into communication with her, she would reassure him about Fred; he felt certain of it. And Charles was preparing to rush off like a demented being, when Mrs. Hinchliffe stopped him, and with considerable dignity informed him that she must positively know what steps he intended taking about Lucy.

For her part no breath of scandal had ever before touched either her, or her singularly upright family. She was entirely new to such upsets, and could not face the unpleasantness of the situation. She had written to Lucy strongly, most strongly, urging her to return to her husband, her home, and her duty. She had directed the letter to the hotel at Lugano, though she gathered from Lucy's letter that they were on the point of leaving; the letter would be forwarded, Lucy would be sure to get it.

As for the child, Mrs. Hinchliffe could not possibly have him and the nurse at Devonshire Place. She had arranged to leave London that afternoon with her dear friend Mrs. Bannister. Stair and the house would be shut up. Charles must really not put up with such nonsense from the servants. As if there were not troubles enough in the world without bringing in ghosts. It was too ridiculous!

Charles in his utter misery and bewilderment could only think of one thing he could do, and in reply to his mother-in-law's question, said he would wire at once to Lucy. "Come back and all will be forgiven." She must be suffering from some sort of mental aberration; she clearly was not herself, he felt convinced of that. Her mother had no doubt written very harshly to her; it was kindness she needed, she must be made to feel that no doors were closed, that all could yet be set right.

Yes, that was the thing for him to do, and hastily bidding adieu to Mrs. Hinchliffe, Charles rushed off to the nearest telegraph office.

From there he jumped into the first hansom he saw and drove straight to Maida Vale. To his surprise he found that Mrs. Carteret had returned alone the night before quite unexpectedly.

"She was very tired," the servant said, and in fact seemed quite ill, no better for the change, but she would enquire if Mrs. Carteret could see him, if he would wait in the dining-room while she went upstairs to see.

Charles paced the room uneasily. What could have brought Mrs. Carteret back so soon? and by herself too? but—! No, no, it was too horrible to contemplate such an idea. Charles simply could not face it! It was all some mistake, some nightmare; Mrs. Carteret would be able to explain; but as the door opened

and Mrs. Carteret herself entered, her handsome face worn and grey, her shoulders bent as if with an added weight of years, Charles grasped the truth. He sank into a chair and covered his face with his hands, imploring her to tell him all she knew.

Gently and sympathetically Mrs. Carteret told Charles the whole story as known to herself. How Fred had struggled and striven with his love for his friend's wife, and how the thought of treachery to Charles had almost driven him mad, till finally he had decided that flight was the only course open to him, hence their hastily planned journey to the Continent. How in his restlessness he had gone on to Lugano, and left her for a few days' longer stay in Paris where she had friends. How she was to have followed him to Switzerland on the very day that she received a wire from him to stop her. "Do not come, Lucy has joined me here, we go to Italy together, forgive me Mother, Fred." So far no letter had come, and Mrs. Carteret had returned at once to Maida Vale. She had no further reason for remaining abroad, and longed for the quiet of her own home.

There was nothing to be done, the die was cast. It was hopeless to attempt to follow them; besides it would be useless; they had chosen, the thing was done.

Mrs. Carteret did all she could to comfort the unhappy Charles and insisted that it would be a great consolation to her to have Mrs. Gorhambury and the baby in the house. Charles would go back to sleep at his chambers, and come and see her and his son as often as ever he could, and The Cedars must be shut up for the time being.

So far Charles had said nothing about the mysterious visit of the Doctor, merely dwelling on the fact of a sudden domestic upheaval at The Cedars, and the inability of Mrs. Hinchliffe to take in the baby and the nurse, but when at Mrs. Carteret's insistence he returned that evening to dine with her, and inspect Master Charles in his new quarters in which he had been installed late in the afternoon, Charles unburdened himself of the whole strange story of his interview with the old Doctor. Mrs. Carteret appeared startled at first, but her firm conviction that her brother-in-law was really dead remained unchanged, Charles's mental condition at the time of the alleged interview inclining her to the theory of hallucination. But then there was that servant who had seen him first! and the strangeness of the story he had told about himself! certainly unknown to Charles, and only just in these latter years even suspected by her! The

message to Fred might have been a sort of subconscious working of Charles' own brain, but the other, no!

It was all very puzzling, very unaccountable. Still she could not rid herself of a sort of certainty in her own mind that the Doctor had been murdered, and that Charles in his overwrought state *must* somehow have dreamt the whole thing.

The days that followed were days of intense misery to Charles. The whole fabric of his life seemed to have crumbled away and left him high and dry in a changed world. He felt himself aimlessly drifting God knows where to God knows what. Charles the Third alone kept him from yielding to the temptation to end it all by his own hand.

In due course Mrs. Carteret received a letter from her son. Lucy had come to him desolate and disconsolate. What could he do? It was a *force majeure*; they were in the hands of the Fates. It was bad, and mad, and sad, and he could never forgive himself. But if only his mother really knew his Lucy. She was an angel, and to know all is to forgive all, and so forth for pages and pages of a closely written but most unconvincing letter.

They were going on to Italy, he said. Charles would of course apply for a divorce, and then they could be married at once. He felt sure his mother would get to love Lucy and understand her, and in the end all would, must, be well.

For Lucy's sake Charles made no delay in suing for a divorce. He placed the matter unreservedly in the hands of Mr. Trymer with instructions to make everything as easy as possible for Lucy and not to regard him himself or his interests in any way. The Cedars had been bought with money that was to come to Lucy, and Charles would merely remove his household goods, pay off the servants, and as to the rest Mrs. Hinchliffe must be consulted.

So it came about that The Cedars was again to be sold, and Mr. and Mrs. Grewbeer came to their own as caretakers. They dwelt persistently and with much emphasis on the bad luck that the house seemed to bring its occupants, and the many mysterious happenings that had occurred there. In consequence The Cedars got a doubtful reputation and stood empty for a long time, until at last it was bought by an enterprising doctor who contemplated building on another wing, and converting it into a sanatorium for consumptive patients.

Meanwhile Charles had got into the habit of frequenting Maida Vale. Mrs. Carteret had always seemed so genuinely upset whenever he had suggested taking a house and having his son with him, that the arrangement had drifted on. Nancy continued her weekly visits to Mrs. Carteret. Charles in consequence saw a great deal of her, and before they were either of them aware of it they found they had become indispensable to each other, and in the end Elbows married Nosey, and they live in St. John's Wood to be as near Mrs. Carteret as possible.

As for Fred, as soon as the divorce was procured he at once married Lucy, but they continued to live abroad, and arranged that Mrs. Carteret should go to Homburg to meet them, Lucy having objected to returning to England on any terms. Mrs. Carteret had been still heavier hearted about Fred after this meeting, and disliked Lucy more than ever. It struck her that even in those early days he was beginning to weary of a life of continued idleness at foreign spas, though he refused to admit it, and that Lucy with her beauty and money was likely to drift away from him and get bored by his constant hankering after a settled home. And when later on she eloped with a Russian prince, Mrs. Carteret was not astonished, and felt that on the whole perhaps it was the best thing that could happen to Fred.

He, Fred, had then returned to England, looking old and worn, but had found it impossible to pick up the threads of his old life, so in the end he decided to go to Canada and start life and work anew. The true revelation of Lucy's real character built a bridge for a reconciliation between Fred and his old friend Charles, and the two met once again on the evening before Fred sailed for Canada.

As for Mrs. Hinchliffe she never forgave Lucy, and as the latter's career became more and more stamped as that of an adventuress, she openly denounced her, refusing to have any further communication with her. She continued, however, to see her grandchild at stated intervals, and settled all the money she had control over on him, disinheriting her daughter.

Lucy never made the slightest attempt to see her child, and as time wore on Charles's great fear that she would do so died a natural death.

Nothing more was heard of Dr. Carteret, letters of administration were taken out, and his affairs were wound up, and a new headmaster reigned at Vexton Stultifer.

THE OLD MADHOUSE

As for Charles he never could entirely rid his mind of the idea that his old schoolmaster must be hiding somewhere, but Mrs. Carteret stuck to her conviction that he was dead, most probably murdered.

Communications with Scotland Yard over the disappearance had practically ceased, when one morning the maid brought up Mr. Manton's card to Mrs. Carteret with a request that she would see him on important business.

After being duly shown in to the somewhat flustered Mrs. Carteret, and the door carefully closed, the Inspector, with but an indifferent attempt at subduing his sense of professional triumph to an attitude of becoming sympathy with the bereaved, produced a gold watch and chain, and a bunch of keys easily identified by Mrs. Carteret as belonging to her brother-in-law. She turned very pale, but asked in a strangely composed voice, if they had found the murderer.

"Not murdered at all, Madam," was the reply, "an accident, most peculiar." He then proceeded to tell her how in the course of the alterations at The Cedars the greenhouse had been pulled down, and the tiled floor that Charles had had laid along the passage leading to it been taken up, and how the men in shifting some heavy iron girders had let one end of their load drop, just about the middle of the passage. That the weight of the girders had caused a hitherto unsuspected trap door to spring open. That on examination they found that there had evidently been a surprise bath there worked by pulleys on the other side of the wall of the passage. The trap was most skilfully concealed in order to deceive the unsuspecting lunatic, who when walking along the passage had been suddenly let down into the bath, with a view to the beneficial effects supposed to accrue from the shock of an unexpected plunge into cold water. The springs were rusty and stiff with age, and only a very heavy weight could have caused them to spring open.

On examination they found that about a quarter of the way down there had been an iron grating that allowed of the water being drained off, and also prevented the patients falling to the bottom of the well, which was of a very great depth. This iron grating had rusted and worn away with time, but some jagged edges were left sticking out, on which they had found torn pieces of tweed clothing, evidently of a recent make, and on penetrating to the bottom of the now dried up well, they had come upon the skeleton of a very big man, which Scotland Yard had promptly identified as that of the missing Doctor. The sewer and pipes by

which the well had formerly been filled from a stream, that in those days flowed close to the house, but that had long since been diverted into another channel, were all intact, and swarming with rats.

It was easy to see how it had all happened. The great weight of the unfortunate Doctor, when he inadvertently trod on the concealed spring of the trap door had caused it to fly open and let him through with a sudden jerk, that closed it up again behind him. He must have tried in vain to catch at any projection that could possibly stay his fall, but the iron grating was worn away and completely rotten and gave way as he clutched it. The chances were that falling to that depth he had been killed outright on reaching the bottom. The extremely close fitting of the trap door that closed behind him, the army of rats in the old sewer, and finally the tiled floor that had been laid down the whole length of the passage, all combined to make the discovery of the tragedy unlikely. It was the merest chance that had brought to light the horrible way Dr. Carteret had met his end.

But of Charles's interview with him that afternoon in the study at The Cedars no explanation was ever forthcoming, and Charles to this day believes it was really his old schoolmaster either in the body or out of it, who came to him in a vain endeavour to make the crooked straight, and tell the secret of his own lifelong love.

A FEW LAST WORDS TO THE READER

I FEEL that a short explanation might be welcome to the readers of this unfinished novel, in order that they may understand how the notes as to the proposed ending of the story come to be really what my husband had intended and not merely a matter of surmise on my part.

When my husband started on one of his novels, he did so without making any definite plot. He created his characters and then waited for them to act and evolve their own plot. In this way the puppets in the show became real living personalities to him, and he waited, as he expressed it, "to see what they would do next."

It was his usual practice to read out aloud to me every Sunday evening all he had written during the week. When the novel was completed we read it aloud again straight through from the beginning to the end, so that he might judge of how the story came as a whole, omitting or adding parts as he considered necessary. This process of weeding or elaborating was not always left till the completion of the story, but he relied on being able to do it before giving his work to the public.

As the story was always read to me while in progress I too got to believe in the reality of the characters, and found myself thinking of them as real live people, and I have frequently asked him when he came down to lunch, or had finished writing for the day, such a question as, for instance, "Well, have they quarrelled yet?" and he would reply, as the case might be, "No, I don't know if they will come to a quarrel; after all, I must wait and see what they do." However, towards the end of the book when an intelligible winding-up of the story became imperative, the plot was taken up and carefully considered, all the straggling threads gathered together and finalities decided upon, though latitude was always allowed for details to shape themselves after their own fashion.

Thus it happened that on that last Friday night in December, when my husband laid down his pen in the middle of a sentence never to be completed, he had told me as much as he knew himself of what the ending of the book was to be. I am therefore able to give a short synopsis of his ideas, and furthermore to

assure the reader that not one word has been altered in the manuscript. It is exactly as my husband left it; even in places where I knew he had intended to make some slight alteration, I have left it as it was written.

My husband's handwriting was wonderfully clear and distinct, with very few erasures. He considered that he wrote very slowly, but judging by the amount of work he got through, this cannot be regarded as having been the fact. He never made rough copies and practically finished as he went; everything was so complete that he found even a slight alteration in the text would often let him in for as much work as the writing of a whole chapter would have given him.

Latterly he found that he did his best writing after tea, but he never could be persuaded to give up the traditional working hours of the artist, with the result that he usually spent the whole day in his study, not allowing himself a short walk before dinner.

When the war broke out his instinct for mechanical invention revived, and he spent much thought on various schemes that he submitted from time to time to the board of inventions, always hoping to hit on some contrivance that would be of real service. In this way valuable time was stolen from literature. Still, he told me that even with all the other work he had on hand, two more months would see the novel completed. But alas it was not to be!

EVELYN DE MORGAN.

